POPPY OTT AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH

BY LEO EDWARDS

Jack Staples. "Xmas 1937"

POPPY OTT
AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH

CATCHING OUR DOLLAR GOLDFISH, MIND YOU!

Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 17)

POPPY OTT

AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH

BY

LEO EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF
THE POPPY OTT BOOKS
THE JERRY TODD BOOKS

ILLUSTRATED BY
BERT SALG

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To

My Pal

BUD WILBER

YOU CAN BE A "FRECKLED GOLDFISH," TOO!

Boys living near my home in Wisconsin, who read the manuscript of this story before the book was published, asked me eagerly if I cared if they got up a real secret lodge, like Poppy's, as featured in the book's seventh chapter.

That gave me an idea. Why not go my enthusiastic young friends one better, I thought, and get up a widely extended secret "fun" lodge, open to all Poppy Ott and Jerry Todd fans everywhere?

Would *you* like to become a member of The Secret & Mysterious Order of The Freckled Goldfish? A registration book has been started here. And in this book will be recorded the names and addresses of all boys joining the order. It is a very *big* book. But I believe that in a few years' time we can fill it. Your name will help to fill it.

Not only will we keep a record here of all members, but each one will receive a unique num-

bered membership card, designed by Bert Salg, the popular illustrator of these books.

Containing a comical picture of Poppy's "Freckled Goldfish," together with our secret rules, each card will also bear my own personal autograph.

Any boy anywhere, of any size, age or color, who has a friendly feeling toward Poppy and Jerry is welcome to join. It will cost you two two-cent United States postage stamps. One stamp will pay the postage on your membership card; and the other stamp will partly cover the cost of the envelope and the printed card.

In applying for membership, please observe these simple rules:

(1) Write your name plainly.

(2) Supply your complete address.

(3) Give your age and (if convenient) your nationality.

(4) Enclose two two-cent United States postage stamps.

(5) Address your letter to,

Leo Edwards,
Cambridge, Wisconsin.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	A "Fishy" Beginning	1
II	The Hidden House	11
III	Too Much Soap!	27
IV	The Freckle Specialist	37
V	A Tree with a Cow's Head	51
VI	Poppy's Wonderful Scheme	59
VII	The Freckled Goldfish	70
VIII	Hidden Eyes	83
IX	The Sleeping Dwarf	94
X	The New Secretary	105
XI	Professor Pip's Muddy Return	118
XII	Doc Leland's Story	137
XIII	Through the Keyhole	152
XIV	In the Laboratory	162
XV	Poor Red!	175
XVI	The Mystery Deepens	191
XVII	An Amazing Discovery	200
XVIII	The Freckle Epidemic	209
XIX	The Secret Staircase	221
XX	What We Saw in the Laundry	234
XXI	In the Old Storm Sewer	246
XXII	The Mystery Ends	254

LEO EDWARDS' BOOKS

Here is a complete list of Leo Edwards' published books:

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Trigger Berg and the Treasure Tree
Trigger Berg and His 700 Mouse Traps
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THE ANDY BLAKE SERIES

Andy Blake
Andy Blake's Comet Coaster
Andy Blake's Secret Service
Andy Blake and the Pot of Gold

POPPY OTT AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH

CHAPTER I

A "FISHY" BEGINNING

"WHAT ever was your object in buying the goldfish in the first place?" I asked Poppy Ott.

"Speculation," says he shortly.

"Then you must have struck a big bargain," says I.

"No," he shook his head.

It seemed to me that he was acting kind of mysterious. And this, coming on top of his peculiar goldfish purchase, puzzled me.

"How much did you pay?" I finally pinned him down.

"Two hundred dollars."

I stared at him.

"Two hundred dollars?" I yipped. "Are you crazy?"

"There was a reason," says he, to further mystery, "why I couldn't pay less."

"Say, Poppy," says I, giving him a steady eye, "you weren't hypnotized, were you?"

"When?"

"The day they hung you up for the two hundred bucks."

"There wasn't any 'they,' to it, Jerry," says he quietly. "It was a 'she.' "

"Oh! . . ." I took another long look at him. "Chivalry stuff, huh?"

"Something like that," he admitted.

I could see now why he had been acting so mysterious. He had a shine on some girl. And it was through her, in some way or another, that he had been touched for the two hundred bucks. The thought of him letting a girl turn his head that way sickened me. Considering his fine record I had expected him to show better sense. Now, with a girl on the string, our fun, probably, would be a thing of the past. Instead of solving mysteries, the young lover would want to put in his time scribbling sonnets and doing the usual moonlight ukulele stuff under the fair maiden's bay window.

"Poppy," says I, getting sicker every minute over his shameful downfall, "is it a serious case?"

"Would I have paid her two hundred dollars for a tubful of goldfish," he countered earnestly, "if it wasn't?"

Curiosity got the better of my other feelings.

"But where did she get the goldfish in the first place?" I puzzled.

"Raised them, I guess."

"Evidently," says I, "she must have a mamma goldfish and a papa goldfish."

"Yes," says he, "evidently she has."

"And you actually dished out the two hundred dollars to her?"

"In cash," he nodded.

"Poppy," says I, sort of jealous-like, "does she run her fingers through your hair, and things like that?"

"Yesterday," says he, "when I handed her the two hundred dollars, she told me that she loved me dearly. She kissed me, too. Right there," he brazenly pushed out his cheek at me.

I could feel him slipping away from me. For the kissing stage is critical.

"I suppose she'll spend the money on her trousseau," I choked down my loneliness.

"Her which?" says he, letting out his neck.

"Her wedding dress," I put it in plainer words.

"No," shook his head. "She expects to spend it on her roof."

"Her *roof?*" I stared. "What do you mean? —the top of her *head?*"

"No," he grinned, "the roof of her house."

This was funny talk, I thought. Roofs, as a rule, don't interest lovers half as much as porch swings and over-stuffed davenports.

"Do I know her?" says I.

"I think so."

"Is she as young as you are?"

"No," he grinned again, "she is seventy-six."

It came so unexpectedly that I almost keeled over. And what a relief! Oh, boy! It was like getting Poppy back from the grave.

He told me then that the old lady had kissed him in gratitude. For it was to help her with a two-hundred-dollar roofing bill that he had bought the goldfish. Then he brought out a notebook.

"Say, Jerry," says he, "does your ma have any goldfish in the house?"

"No."

"All right," says he, quickly writing down the name, "that makes prospect number one. How about your pa?"

"Business men don't have goldfish in their offices," says I.

"A good many of the Tutter business men are going to have goldfish in their offices," says he, with a determined waggle, "before we get through with them."

"I've got a photograph of you," says I, "selling my pa a goldfish."

"Not *a* goldfish, Jerry. Make it plural."

"Meaning a mamma goldfish and a papa goldfish, huh?"

"Exactly. We'll sell them in pairs. Sort of joined together in the finny bonds of matrimony, as it were."

"I suppose, as the leader, you know which *is* the papa," I grinned.

"That's easy. You poke your finger in the water. Like this—see? If *he* bites it, it's a he; and if *she* bites it, it's a she."

"You're cuckoo," I told him. But, just the same, he could see by my eyes how much I liked him. Good old Poppy! There's always plenty of fun when he's around.

"Can you think of any more good prospects, Jerry?" he grinned.

"Sure thing," says I, ready to match his nonsense with some of my own clever junk. "There's the slaughterhouse and the stockyards. It will be a real treat to the bulls to have a globe of goldfish to look at."

"I know Mr. Carlton," says Poppy, speaking the name of the local stockyards man. "We ought to sell at least three pairs of mammas and papas to him."

"How much," says I, "are the bulls and other customers supposed to cough up for the distinguished privilege of getting on our list of satisfied users?"

"The goldfish, at two hundred dollars a thousand, cost us twenty cents apiece."

"Which is twice what the variety store charges for them," I reminded.

"You can't buy fantails at ten-cent-store prices," he showed me how well-informed he was.

"Who cares about tails?" I waved him off with a big gesture.

"That's one of our strongest talking points," says he.

"People take it for granted," says I, "that fish have tails. If you were selling cats," I dished out the brilliant example, "you wouldn't say: 'Each one of our pussy cats has a tail.' Without a tail, a cat wouldn't be a cat. And it's the same with fish."

"I thought at first," says Poppy, mulling his brains around, "that it would be hard to meet the variety-store competition. But that isn't worrying me now."

"Have you marked down the price to nine cents?" says I cheerfully.

"Nine cents is no price," he gave me a kind of unfriendly look. "We'd be losing money to sell at that figure."

"Well, what of that," I grinned, "if we can get the business?"

"Jerry," says he, "of two pocketknives, one costing ten cents and the other a dollar, which one gets the most attention?"

"The dollar knife, of course."

"Absolutely," he waggled. "And what is true of pocketknives," he added, "is also true of goldfish, and everything else."

"Meaning which?" says I, eyeing him in anticipation.

"That the price of our goldfish is going to be a dollar each."

"Good-by," says I, starting off. "I'll see you on the thirty-second of December."

"The big job, of course," he studied, "will be to find a way of making the Tutter people want to patronize us, at a dollar a throw, instead of favoring the variety store."

"Dollar goldfish! If I start laughing I'll never stop. So don't touch me in the ribs."

We were now walking down School Street, with the old Warmley homestead just ahead of us, on the left, and beyond that, across Hill Street, Mr. Sam Lung's corner laundry, where I was supposed to stop and inquire about a pair of B.V.D.'s that had been subtracted from the family washing.

Poppy suddenly ducked into the bushes.

"Come on, Jerry," he beckoned.

"Where to?"

"The big fountain. I want to see if our mamma goldfish and papa goldfish are getting breakfast for the little goldfish."

Well, say, all I could do, for a moment or two, as I suddenly got the drift of things, was to stand there and stare.

"Come on," he beckoned impatiently.

"Just a minute, Poppy," I got my voice. "Is Mrs. Warmley the old lady who did the kissing act?"

He nodded, grinning.

"And did she put up a poor mouth to you?"

"No. But I saw how things were with her. And to help her out, as I say, I offered to buy the goldfish for two hundred dollars."

"And has she got the two hundred dollars?"

"Sure thing." Pausing, he took a curious squint at me. "What's the matter, Jerry? You look queer."

"Poppy," says I soberly, "I hate to tell you the truth. For, as my best pal, it grieves me to humiliate you. But it's a fact, kid, newcomer that you are around here, Mrs. Warmley played you for a sucker. *Poor?* Why, she's the richest woman in the county. She has *barrels* of money. Everybody who has grown up around here knows that. A miser, Poppy," I waggled, laying it off with my finger. "That's what *she* is."

The other had his ears stretched.

"Listen!" says he.

From the direction of the big, lonely house, long ago shut in by untrimmed trees and rag-

ged bushes, came the sound of busy hammers.

"It's the carpenters," says Poppy, with a kind of happy look, which, as you can imagine, wasn't the way I had expected him to look at all. "They're at work on the roof. I promised Mrs. Warmley that I would pick up the old shingles for her, to kindle fires with. So, let's shake a leg, Jerry. The work won't take us more than an hour. Then we'll check up on our goldfish. If there's more than a thousand," he concluded earnestly, "we'll have to pay her extra. For we mustn't cheat a poor old lady."

CHAPTER II

THE HIDDEN HOUSE

POPPY OTT was a sort of puzzle to me when I first began running around with him. Realizing that he was just a boy after all I couldn't quite trust his big schemes. The thing for him to do, I thought, was to put his ambition on a strict diet. But from association with him over a decidedly lively period I've come to the conclusion that mere size is unimportant. A diamond is a million times more valuable than a paving brick. Certainly the mere fact that he's a boy with fuzz on his upper lip hasn't handicapped old Poppy to any noticeable extent.

The first adventure that I shared with him was the mystery of the "Stuttering Parrot." There, let me tell you, is where the shivers piled in on us. Oh, baby! Even now if I wake up in the middle of the night, when all is silent, I find myself listening sort of breathless-like, my nerves all on edge, for footfalls on the roof. Those peculiar bird-like footfalls! *Such* a mystery!

Then came the "Seven-League Stilts." It was fun to call ourselves stilt manufacturers. It sounded big. But there was no pretending with Poppy. No, sir-ee! The usual man-sized dreams were turning handsprings in the back of his head. And, as the story's climax goes to prove, he made those dreams come true.

With our new stilt factory hippering along at full speed we then merrily set forth on a "hitch-hike," as a sort of vacation, where we fell in with a mysterious old geezer and an equally goofy spotted gander. Oh, boy, talk about *fun!* No wonder the kids called the rickety old bus "The Galloping Snail." Here, again, in the unusual house where the millionaire had died so strangely, we bumped into further "ghost" stuff—weird rap-a-tap-taps, which old Mrs. Doane declared was death raps, gliding footfalls, unseen, gimlet eyes, the pleasant smell of a "dead man," and a bewitched clock.

The mystery solved, spotted gander and all, we lit out for home, and no sooner had we hit the old burg than we found ourselves, so to speak, buried in cucumbers up to our ears. Then came the famous "Pedigreed Pickles." At one time things looked pretty dark for us. But with

old Poppy manfully jiggling the helm, we weathered the gale, as the saying is, sailing into port with flying colors.

"Oh, Poppy's smart, all right! As I've said before, the angels had a particularly generous streak the day they screwed him together and tacked on the address. Instead of sifting in a spoonful of brains, the usual portion, they dumped in a whole kettleful. Then, to sort of even things, they dumped in an extra gob of courage and two extra gobs of loyalty. There he is as I know him—a boy with his wits about him, true-blue all the way through, as fine a buddy as ever slid down a slivery plank.

In further description, to be serious, I might add that old Poppy has the manliest ways, the broadest grin, the most thoughtful eyes, the best diving lungs and the biggest neck wart of any boy in Tutter. His pa, you may remember, if you have read the earlier books of this series, is the general manager of the growing stilt business. So spruce and dignified is Mr. Ott to-day, and so businesslike, that it's hard to believe that only a short time ago he was a tramp. But, to that point, see the big change in Poppy, himself!

As written down in the opening of my story,

the leader's latest interest had puzzled me. But now I had a good line on him. He had bought the goldfish, not because he particularly wanted them, or even considered them a good investment, but to help out an old lady who had let him believe that she was too hard up to buy shingles for her own leaky roof.

That was like Poppy, of course! He's never so happy as when he's looking out for some one else. His idea of a daily good turn is to keep on turning until bedtime. And what a big joy it had been to him, no doubt, to liberally cough up the needed two hundred dollars. Yet, in doing so, what a silly monkey he had made of himself!

For, as I have written down, Mrs. Potter Warmley wasn't poor at all, though to give her the curious once-over in her old-fashioned toggery you'd think that she had to depend, for clothing, on other people's ragbags. She owns property in the heart of the business section that will bring a hundred thousand dollars any day in the week. A *hundred thousand dollars,* mind you! Probably, like the miser that she is, she has another hundred thousand dollars stuck away in the local banks. All you need to do is to take one squint

at her run-down place to realize that her main interest in life is hoarding money. People of that stamp will let buildings rot to the ground for want of paint. They'll even go hungry. And how my usually keen-minded chum had been so completely taken in was beyond me.

Of course, he had gotten something in return for his money—it wasn't as though the two hundred dollars was an out-and-out donation. But two hundred dollars is a whale of a big price to pay for a thousand goldfish. I'll tell the world! This was one time when Poppy's kind heart had upset his usual good business judgment.

We could hear the voices of the carpenters as they galloped around the house roof with their hammers. And through the bushes, just ahead of us, came the silvery tinkle of the big fountain, at one time the central ornament in a wide, well-kept lawn. But when you shut your eyes on a lawn for years and years, giving it no attention, it fast becomes a jungle. And so it was here. The bushes that had been kept so carefully trimmed in an earlier day, were now young giants. New saplings had sprung up; and the mother trees tried constantly to find new ways of cluttering up the place. In consequence, the

lonely homestead had gained the name of the "Hidden House." And that is exactly what it was—a town house, built extravagantly in the middle of a square, with streets on all four sides, completely shut in by a living jungle.

Mrs. Warmley wasn't liked very well. The neighbors were out of patience with her because she didn't make her place look like something. She had no civic pride, they said. And the local real estate men, to their part, were out of patience with her because she wouldn't give up a foot of her valuable land. What they wanted to do, of course, was to lay out the block in store frontages, for, as I say, the property was located in the very heart of the business section. But their big offers didn't change her. And feeling the neighborhood's growing unfriendliness, the old lady, in late years, had kept more and more to herself.

What gave me something of an interest in her was her unusual collection of goldfish, the raising of which was a sort of hobby. I had found out, though, that it didn't please her for two cents to have the town kids hanging around her big goldfish fountain, which, though run down like the rest of the premises, was still able to squirt

a fairly good-sized stream. It was the report that in the winter time the goldfish were kept in the house.

Pushing aside the bushes, Poppy and I came within full sight of the big fountain, and what do you know if Chester Ringbow wasn't parked there, as big as cuffy, with a fishing pole stuck out in front of him. Catching our dollar goldfish, mind you! The nerve of some young sprouts!

The Ringbows haven't lived in Tutter many months. And from what I've seen of them, mother and son, I can imagine how terribly grieved the other town was when they packed up and got out. Oh, yes! Mrs. Flossie Ringbow is the owner of the new beauty parlor on School Street, directly opposite Mr. Lung's corner laundry. Some swell joint!—meaning the beauty parlor, of course, and not the laundry. But the old beauty parlor next door to the laundry, run by Red Meyers' aunt, Mrs. Pansy Biggle, is still hitting on all six, I'm told, and getting its share of the local beautifying business.

The day "The Charm" had its grand opening, which was a kind of flower show set to orchestra music, with Mrs Flossie flitting around among the tulips and sunflowers all lit up in satin and

diamonds, young Rainbow, as we call him, playfully bounced a rock off Red Meyers' bean, which nicely touched off the dynamite, so to speak, and when the battle clouds had cleared away, thus giving Mrs. Flossie a peek at the staggering human wreck that was once the cunning little rock-pegging genius of the family, there was indignant talk on mamma's part of a lawsuit.

And here, as I say, was little fussbudget, twiddling a baited hook under the very snouts of some of our choicest stock-in-trade.

"Beat it," scowled the lordly young sportsman, giving us our orders. "This isn't a public park."

"What is it?" says Poppy, showing his temper. "A zoo?"

"Don't get funny with your Uncle Dudley," Rainbow ran out his neck, "or I'll give you a free ride to the hospital."

"Who told you that you could fish here?"

"None of your business."

I got the leader's ear.

"He's the target-hitter," says I, "who socked Red Meyers with the young tombstone."

"Well, well," I then came in for special jeering attention, "if it isn't little 'Jelly.' "

He had heard the Chinaman call me that.

"Your face will be jelly," I shoved out my jaw at him, "if I light into you."

"Don't muss up his face any worse than it is," Poppy put in.

"If it looked half as bad as yours," smarty neck-stretched some more, "I'd hate to own it."

Just then the fisherman's bobber went down.

"Hot dog!" he yipped, yanking on the line. "This is fun."

Angrily jerking the pole out of the other's hands, Poppy carefully unhooked the wriggling fish, returning it unharmed to the pool.

Bing! Before I could yell to my chum to warn him, a dirty cob struck the side of his face, after which ten-year-old stunt the enemy lit out on high gear.

"I'll get you guys," he screeched over his shoulder.

Poppy wiped his cheek.

"I have a hunch," says he, with a kind of tight look around the mouth, "that young Rainbow and yours truly are going to meet again."

"When you do meet him," I spit out, "knock him cold. For he ought to know better than to go around pegging stuff like a little kid."

"Oh! . . . I don't want to get into a fist fight

and have people call me a rowdy. There's other ways of fixing *him.*"

During the past few months I had been too busy "Seven-League-Stilting" and "Pedigreed-Pickling" to give much thought to Mrs. Warmley's goldfish tribe, but now, with a personal interest in the goldfish, I curiously circled the deep pool.

"Well," grinned Poppy, following me, "what do you think of them?"

"If there aren't two thousand here," says I, watching the flashing gold as the fish turned their sides to the sun, "I'll eat my shirt."

"See that big one, Jerry," the leader pointed. "Isn't he a darb? Look at his spiffy tail."

"That must be the papa," I grinned.

"They sure are beauties."

"It's a queer hobby," says I, "for a woman as tight as Mrs. Warmley."

The other didn't like that.

"Say, Jerry," he caught my eyes, "where do you get that 'tight' stuff?"

"And do you still believe," I stared at him in surprise, "that she's a poor woman?"

"She has plenty of property," he admitted, looking around.

"Yah," I bobbed my head, "I guess she has! And she's got money in the bank, too."

"What makes you think so?" he followed up quietly.

"I think so, because the neighbors all say so."

"It may be," came in further quietness, "that the neighbors are wrong."

"My," I stuck up my nose, "aren't we smart!"

The moment I said it, though, I was sorry. But to tell the truth it sort of griped me to have him contradict my story. For having lived in Tutter all my life I felt that I ought to know more about local history than him.

Still, it suddenly was pushed into my memory, all I knew about the queer goldfish owner was what I had heard. And plainly the leader had been in closer contact with her than me.

"Jerry," he paid no attention to my spiteful outburst, "I'm going to tell you a secret. Mrs. Warmley is rich in property, as we all know, but she hasn't enough real money coming in to support a canary bird."

It wasn't to be doubted that he knew what he was talking about. And in consequence I was somewhat bewildered. A fellow always feels

that way when old ideas are suddenly turned upside down.

"If she's as money poor as that," was my natural question, "why doesn't she sell out?"

Certainly I couldn't see any sense in a woman suffering for the want of ready money when she owned a hundred thousand dollars' worth of desirable property.

"Remember, Jerry," came in further earnestness, "this is a secret."

"Shoot," says I. "For you ought to know by this time that you can trust me with any kind of a secret—even the name of your best girl."

"I didn't know I had one," he grinned, like the good old pal that he is.

"Stick to your story," says I.

"This place, as you may have heard," he then went on, "was built by Mr. Potter Warmley, one of the county's pioneer cement manufacturers."

"Everybody around here knows about him," I put in.

"He had big ideas, as was shown when he built this place. The house is a young hotel in size. It cost him fifty thousand dollars. Today, in its run-down condition, it wouldn't sell for five thousand dollars. But, as I say, the land

is worth a fortune. Everything was kept shipshape during Mr. Warmley's lifetime. A landscape gardener gave all of his time to the grounds. Servants did the housework. There was a conservatory, too, filled with flowers the year around."

"I know the place," I nodded. "It's around in back. That is where I caught the big owl that tried to nip my finger off."

"Did you ever hear of Sidney Warmley?" Poppy then inquired.

"Sure thing. He was the only son."

"On his tenth birthday his mother gave him a pair of goldfish, which explains how the goldfish got started. Later on, when he got into long pants, he turned out bad. Things went wrong at the cement mill, too. Dying, Mr. Warmley left more debts than ready cash. The mill was sold. And the money it brought, above the debts, was mostly spent by Mrs. Warmley in trying, without success, to locate her runaway son. It is in the continued hope that he still will walk in on her some day that she has kept the place all these years, just as it was when he left, goldfish and all. Now you know why she won't sell; and you know about the goldfish, too. Instead

of rolling in money, as the neighbors think, she hardly knows where her next sack of flour is coming from. I tell her that she ought, at least, to sell off a lot or two. But, no, she promised her dying husband that she would keep the entire property for the runaway son; and you can depend on it that she'll never break her word, however foolish it looks to you and me."

"From your talk," says I, "you must be on pretty good terms with her."

"I am," he nodded. "When I first came to town I cleaned out her cistern, thinking, of course, like everybody else around here, that she was as rich as dirt. I wish now, though, that I hadn't taken her two dollars. I remind her of her boy, she says, which explains why she has taken such a fancy to me. Yesterday I surprised her on the roof, trying to patch the leaks. Just imagine, Jerry, that old lady on the *roof!* I was scared stiff for fear she would fall and break her neck. Well, getting her down safely, I went up myself. But I saw it was a hopeless case. The old roof had seen its last days. Coming down, I told her that she'd have to shell out the jack for a new roof. And what do you suppose happened, Jerry?"

"What?" says I quickly.

"She fainted dead away. Well, I got her into bed. And I heard things then, when she was out of her head, that gave her away. I took a squint in the pantry. And when I saw the empty shelves I never felt so sick in all my life. The poor old lady! I got some groceries in a jiffy. Later, when she was able to sit up, we had a long frank talk. It did her a lot of good, I guess, to have some one to open her heart to. It was foolish to keep so many goldfish, I told her, when we could sell them. The deal followed. And now you know why I've set the price at a dollar apiece. For the more money we take in the more comforts we'll be able to provide for her."

I shoved out my mitt.

"Poppy," says I, as sober as the day my poor tomcat skidded under the wheels of the garbage truck, "I want to ask your pardon. You aren't dumb; and you aren't greedy. You're all right. I still don't see how we're going to sell dollar goldfish. But, kid, whatever you say goes. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

I stood there loving him with my eyes. And I guess, too, that they were kind of dim eyes. For in that moment, with the goldfish wagging

their happy little tails beside me, I realized more than ever before what a wonderful pal he was.

Splash!

Thrown at us from the bushes, the rock fell short, landing in the pool. Some more of Rainbow's small-boy tricks, of course. We took after him. But, with so many hiding places, he easily dodged us.

CHAPTER III

TOO MUCH SOAP!

MRS. WARMLEY saw us in the yard. And when our shingle-piling job was completed she called us into the kitchen, setting out a treat for us. Two big hunks of chocolate cake. Um-yum!

I now saw what a nice old lady she was. Of course, to that point, she always had been a nice old lady, but, in a way, I had let the neighborhood stories turn me against her. When you feel that way toward people you can't see much good in them. I had wronged her, of course. And, in consequence, I felt ashamed of myself. Still, I didn't speak up. A better way of squaring myself, I figured, would be to pitch in and help her.

She was as nice as pie to me, calling me by my front name, which rather surprised me. I didn't know that she knew me. But her mind, I learned, was as bright as her eyes. And how those eyes did shine when she turned them on old Poppy! I could see how much she cared for

him, all right. But don't get the idea that I was jealous. I guess not. I was tickled to death that this new happiness had come into her sad life. And I was proud of Poppy for returning her affection.

Among other things, she asked us, with a smile, if we had sold many goldfish.

"Not yet," says Poppy, chasing the last cake crumb around his plate. "But we expect to get started in a day or two."

"I *do* hope you'll have good luck. If you don't," her voice changed in tone, "I'm going to find some way of repaying you."

She tried to hide her nervousness. But we could see, all right, just how she felt.

"Leave it to old Poppy," I piped up cheerfully. "He could sell cast-iron shoestrings to wooden-legged mermaids."

"*Isn't* he a dear good boy!" the old lady let her affection bubble over. "Now that he has come into my lonely life, I hardly know how I could get along without him."

"Say, Mrs. Warmley," the leader looked around the comfortable kitchen, "do you know what I'd do if I were you?"

The bright eyes were attentive.

"I'd put an ad in the newspaper for boarders."

"Oh, no!" came in quick nervous alarm. "I never would think of doing that. I couldn't stand the work."

"But, with board money coming in, you wouldn't have to work. You could hire help. It really would be easier for you. And you'd always have company in the house."

"No, no! Please don't ask me to do that. I don't mind being alone."

It hadn't percolated into my bean that I was partly the cause of her peculiar nervousness until Poppy spoke up.

"Jerry knows our secret, Mrs. Warmley. As my buddy, I couldn't very well keep it from him. Besides, I need his help. You can trust him. For he's that kind of a kid."

I could see, though, even after this speech, that she didn't like to discuss her affairs in front of me. It was her pride, I suppose. For years and years she had successfully hidden her money poverty, as you might call it, from her neighbors. And however trustworthy we were in her eyes, it distressed her to have us know the truth.

So I sensibly meandered outside, on some slight pretext, where I fooled around, chinning

with the carpenters, until my chum joined me.

"It's the neighbors, Jerry," says he, referring to the rejected money-making scheme. "She doesn't want them to know about her circumstances. And boarders, of course, would sort of give her away."

"Well, what now?" says I, when we set off down the bushy path. "Do we start sorting the mamma goldfish and the papa goldfish into pairs?"

"No hurry about that. First, I want to call on Mr. Lung."

"You and me, both," says I, remembering about the missing B.V.D's.

"You're a particular friend of his, aren't you, Jerry?"

"Well," was my modest admission, "I haven't any reason to believe that he dislikes me. For last Christmas he gave Dad a fountain pen to slip into my stocking. 'Melican ink stick' is what he called it. I think he's all right—for a Chinaman."

Poppy was now wrapped in his thoughts. And watching him, out of the corner of my eye, I found myself wondering, curiously, what connection there was in his mind between Mr. Lung's corner laundry and our dollar goldfish.

Turning into School Street, we collided with Red Meyers, who was dragging a young stepladder with one hand and swinging a metal bucket with the other.

If you have read any of the books of the "Jerry Todd" series, starting with JERRY TODD AND THE WHISPERING MUMMY, a mystery story, you'll need no introduction to old red-head. His freckles are so thick it's hard to tell where one ends and another begins. Two-legged monkey that he is, and as hot-headed as he is red-headed, you can't be around him a minute without laughing at him.

"Moving?" says I, giving him a lift with the stepladder.

"Oh," he grunted, "it's those blamed old store windows again."

"Aunt Pansy's?" I grinned.

"Sure thing. They always need washing just when I want to do something else."

As I have mentioned, his Aunt Pansy, a widow lady, whose husband fell in the river and never came up for air, runs the old beauty parlor beside the Chinese laundry. Other times I had seen him washing her front windows. She pays him, of course. But he always has to do a certain amount of grumbling. That's his way.

At the Hill-Street crossing we pretty nearly upset Doc Leland's old flivver with the stepladder. Gee, you should have seen Doc's eyes pop out when the car went over the ladder bumpety-bump! Leaving Red on the corner, draped wearily against a telephone pole, Poppy and I turned in at the door of the laundry, where we found the proprietor prancing around, fanning the air with his arms, his long pigtail dancing, the maddest Chinaman you ever set eyes on in all your life.

A bewildered salesman was trying to keep out of the other's way.

"But, Mr. Lung, I'm sure my firm wouldn't have shipped you more laundry soap than you ordered."

"Too much-e soap," screeched the dancing proprietor. "Whole house flull. C'losets flull. Kitchen flull. No room in cellar for coal-e in coal-e place. All flull soap. Make-e me much-e swear. Too blamed plenty soap."

The salesman searched through the stubs of his order book.

"Here it is, Mr. Lung. One thousand cakes of E-Z-R-Rub semi-soft laundry soap."

"No, no!" the proprietor fanned the air some more. "Too much-e soap."

"But these are your figures, Mr. Lung. How can you get around that?"

I was grinning good and plenty now. Several times I had tried to show the Chinaman the difference between 1,000 and 100. Invariably when he wrote "100" he got it "1,000." It was very probable, I thought, that he had added one cipher too many to his soap order.

Everybody in Tutter likes Mr. Lung. For quite a while Mother wouldn't send him any work, having the notion that Chinamen weren't clean. But I had her go down town one afternoon to see his macaw, which took her into his living rooms, and so she saw for herself that he was as neat as wax. Now he gets work from our house every week. He calls me "Jelly," as I have mentioned, which is as close as he can get to "Jerry." And I wish you could hear the mixed-up mess he makes of some of the popular songs, for he can't work without singing, any more than he can talk to a customer without smiling. Good news or bad, he always smiles, showing two rows of the whitest teeth I ever saw.

But, as I say, he wasn't singing or smiling now. I guess not. His Chinese "dander" was aroused for fair. And to end the dispute to his liking,

he grabbed a hot iron, running the salesman out of the building.

"Cheat! Burgle man!" he screeched. "Burn-e lying nose off flace. Me make-e up for too much-e soap. *Robber!*"

Then, when I had told him that he probably had made another mistake with his ciphers, he was sort of disconsolate.

"Ol' fool-e Chinaman," he called himself names. "Much-e dumb in head. Never git Melican one-two-three like li'l' boy klindergarten. Too much-e deep for poor dumb Chinaman."

"If you hadn't made the salesman sore," says I, "you could have sent the extra soap back."

"Too much-e soap," he waggled, as depressed over the mistake as though he had just buried his best friend. "Melican one-two-three no like-e Chinaman's one-two-three."

Poppy and I looked around. The laundryman sure had a houseful of soap, all right! It was piled everywhere.

"Too much-e soap," he kept saying, over and over again, as he followed us around. "Every place, too much-e soap."

"Jerry," the leader quickly got my ear, "we can sell this soap for him, if he'd rather have the money."

I couldn't see any sense to that.

"I thought we were going to sell goldfish?" says I.

"We'll sell the soap first. It won't be any trick. For everybody uses soap. And this ought to be fine dish-washing soap."

We could sell it, all right. I hadn't any doubts about that. But I still couldn't see *why*. It was all unnecessary work, to my notion.

"It won't hurt him," says I, "to have a year's supply of soap on hand."

"But if we help *him*, maybe he'll help *us*."

"What do you mean?"

"We need a down-town location, Jerry."

My wits were beginning to percolate now. And I saw why Poppy had headed for here in the first place.

"A sort of goldfish store, huh?"

"Sure thing," says he. "Look at his windows. Nothing in them but dead flies. They might better be filled with our goldfish. You talk with him, Jerry. For he knows you better than he does me. Tell him that we'll peddle the soap without charge, if he'll let us use the front part of his store. We won't bother him in the least, or interfere in any way with his business. Be sure and tell him that."

In the next few moments it was brought home to me how much it profits a boy to make friends. I know kids in our town who hoot at Mr. Lung whenever they see him in the street, calling him "Old Pigtail" and "Old Chop-suey." But I never do that. Therefore he has a lot of confidence in me. So, when I made him understand how much it would help our goldfish scheme if we could turn the unused part of the laundry into a goldfish store, he showed the first smile since his ruck-a-tuck with the soap salesman.

"Jelly good boy," he patted me on the back. "Jelly good boy all-e time. Old Sam make-e hot iron on c'llars and Jelly and Ploppy make-e glold-flish. Maybe like happy partners."

During the time that we were loading up with soap we heard Red Meyers' lusty bazzoo out in front. We didn't know, though, what was going on in the street until we came from the laundry. Then, as can be imagined, we parked ourselves on the corner to see the fun.

CHAPTER IV

THE FRECKLE SPECIALIST

We had left Red Meyers comfortably draped against a corner telephone pole, hoping that a cyclone would come along and carry off his aunt's beauty parlor, dirty windows and all. But he wasn't to escape the hated window-washing job so easily. And upon our appearance in the street we found him, sponge in hand, sort of pirouetting, or whatever you call it, on the top of the wabbly stepladder.

Boy, when old red-head gets one of these crazy spells, he sure is funny! Recklessness is his middle name.

"Shut up, you half-baked animal cracker," he bellowed across the street, pushing out his jaw like a tough. "Or the first thing you know I'll come over there and hyphenate you from your air supply."

"Go soak your head, you freckled dumb-bell," came the answering bellow.

It was Rainbow! And what do you know if

he, too, wasn't putting on a window-washing program! This was worth seeing, all right. So, as I say, Poppy and I sort of picked out comfortable seats in the front row.

"When you get through scraping that window," Red bellowed some more, "you better blanket it, or it's liable to take cold."

At which Rainbow toughly shoved out his own jaw.

"Is that so," says he.

"Yes, that's so," says Red, making himself look harder than ever.

"If anybody happens to ask you, we wash our windows a whole lot oftener than your old aunt."

"Why don't you wash your ears for a change, and soak off some of the calluses?"

"I'll soak you in the jaw, if you don't shut up."

"And dabble around on the back of your neck," was Red's further cheerful advice. "Maybe you'll find the long-lost family collar button."

"In just about two minutes, guy, you're going to feel the gentle effect of my fist on the end of your sneezing apparatus."

Red jiggled the stepladder recklessly, yipping and waving his arms. The water slopped over

the edge of the pail. And, to tell the truth, I expected nothing else than to see the whole business come down kerplunk!

"Look out!" he gave a wilder bellow. "There's a woodpecker headed your way. You better pull in your head."

Mrs. Biggle waddled to the front door.

"Donald!" came sharply from the fat beauty expert. "Will you *please* make less noise. I hired you to wash windows, not to entertain the whole street. You are disturbing our trade."

Red was having the time of his life. For, as I have said before, he sure loves to shoot off his bazzoo.

"Hey, Aunt Pansy!" he beamed. "Look across the street. The baby's getting its first bath."

Mrs. Biggle's face got red. For it was embarrassing to her to have the window washer publicly draw her attention to the other store. Then she gave a scream, clutching at her fat jeweled throat, as the acrobat did a stork dance on one leg.

"Donald! Stop it! You'll fall and break your neck!"

"Say, Aunt Pansy," grinned the monkey, in

further daring one-legged stuff, "I bet you can't do this."

"Haw! haw! haw!" came coarsely from across the street.

Red turned like a flash.

"Pull in your ears," he bellowed. "Didn't I tell you the government's looking for mules?"

"Who said that solid ivory won't rust," Rainbow gave Red a dig about his hair.

"Draw in your woodpile, pignut," was Red's further contribution, "or I'll come over there and take a chunk out of it."

"Go on home," bellowed Rainbow, "your pa wants his shoes."

Here Mrs. Flossie fluttered around the corner, smelling like a walking perfume factory. And when she and Mrs. Biggle came together on the sidewalk, up went the thin one's nose to the level of her painted eyebrows.

"Say, Ma," chirped the family hope, "look at the copy-cat across the street."

That set Red off again.

"I started first," he bellowed.

"Yes, you did—not," the other stuck out his mug in return.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Chester

dear," mamma tilted her head. "It is the nature of some people to act *common.*"

"If I'm a comma," bellowed Red, mistaking the word, "you're a question mark."

"Donald!" Mrs. Biggle tried to hush him up, her face getting redder every minute.

Up went Mrs. Flossie's aristocratic nose another notch.

"Small-town stuff," she gave her competitor a dig.

Red had his neck stretched.

"Look out!" he screeched, weaving back and forth on the stepladder. "You'll fall over backwards and crack your nameplate."

"Rowdy!" came the hot retort.

"Say, Aunt Pansy," Red went on with his nonsense, "bring me a telescope. I think I see signs of life across the street. Maybe they're going to get a customer."

"It's a cinch," yipped Rainbow, "that we don't see any signs of life on *your* side of the street. Your store is so dead it smells bad."

"Go crawl in a new skin, bologna-face, and weigh yourself."

"Stir yourself, liver-and-onions, you're burning."

"Garlic!"

"Limburger!"

"Cookie-cutter!"

"Pin-head!"

"SAUER-KRAUT!"

"MONKEY-FACE!"

Red then picked up an old song, yipping out the words at the top of his voice.

" 'Come be my rain-bow, my pret-ty rain-bow, my heart-t-t be-*gui-i-ile;* give me a *smi-i-ile;* once in a *whi-i-ile.*' "

"Kill it," bellowed Rainbow. "Don't let it suffer."

"Hey, fish-face, I saw your picture in the meat market."

"You'll see yours under a calla-lily wreath, if you don't dry up."

"It was on a lobster can," hooted Red.

"The talking baboon!" jeered the other in turn.

"Vinegar-face!" Red pushed out his mug.

"Cabbage-head!" Rainbow showed that he could be just as hard.

"Skunk!"

"Louse!"

"Maggot!"

"Carp!"

"BEDBUG!"

"INSECT!"

Mrs. Biggle had now completely lost her temper.

"Donald Meyers!" she wheezed. "I've had enough of this nonsense. If you don't go to work, and keep still, I'm coming up there with a stick."

Red soaked the sponge full of water.

"You hadn't better," he grinned, realizing that he had the advantage, "or you'll get a shower bath."

It was about time now for Rainbow to pull some of his usual mean stuff. So, when he disappeared into the store, I kept an eye on the door. Sure enough, out he came, on the run, with some of his mother's facial clay and a slingshot.

Bing! His back turned for the moment, Red got the clay ball squarely in the seat of the pants. Then, as he spun around, another clay ball struck him in the chest.

There was no pretending now. Old red-head was mad all the way through. But he should have known that he couldn't throw a pail of

water clear across the street. In trying it, he completely lost his balance. Down came rock-a-by, baby and all, as the old rhyme goes, with the stepladder spraddling out like a dying horse. It was some spill, I'll tell the world. Poor Red! He found out that his cranium wasn't half as hard as the concrete sidewalk. It's a wonder he didn't kill himself. And across the street, of course, young Rainbow was laughing his head off. Oh, my, it was *so* funny! Haw! haw! haw! —and some more haw! haw! haw's! Even Mrs. Flossie cracked her hand-painted face with a chimpanzee smile.

Well, we weren't going to see our old pal get the worst of it. I guess not! So we sort of nudged our box of soft soap in his direction. And then—oh, baby! *Bing!* A big gob of soap flattened itself on the beauty-parlor window just above Rainbow's hat rack. *Bing!* This time, due to Red's wild aim, it was Mrs. Flossie who had to duck to keep her physiognomy from getting disfigured for life. *Bing!* The third gob of soap striking him squarely in the bread basket, Rainbow let out a roar like a suffering bull, after which he beat it for cover.

"Come on out, you shriveled-up, knock-kneed,

yellow-livered imitation of a human being," shrieked the victorious soap thrower, strutting up and down the sidewalk. "Just one more little crack, angel-face—that's all I ask of you."

"Ya! ya!" Rainbow made a face through the crack of the door.

And did Red ever *paste* him. Sweet doctor!

As can be imagined, there was considerable of an audience. The kids were yelling all kinds of encouraging truck to Red. And some of the men were on his side, too, particularly old Mr. Blighty, who laughed so hard, on his rheumatic legs, that he had to sit down in the laundry doorway to keep from falling down.

"I swan to Peter!" he cackled, slapping his knees. "If the Germans had had a supply of soap, an' *him,* I bet a cookie we'd 'a' bin licked."

Poppy nudged me.

"Look, Jerry! See who just arrived."

A tall, willowy, middle-aged man, wearing an old-fashioned soft black hat and a baggy black coat, came around the corner, teetering as he walked, as though he had coil springs in his big shoes. His tight-fitting black pants weren't quite long enough for the unusually long legs, and, as though to fill out at the bottom, he wore a pair

of gray spats. Under the left arm was a green umbrella, sort of supported by the bony hand on that side, and the other hairy-backed hand gripped a shabby traveling bag.

Until he caught sight of Red Meyers, the queer-looking stranger seemed to teeter along in a sort of trance. Then he stopped abruptly, blinking, a look of amazement spreading slowly over his long solemn face.

"My word!" he murmured, raising his nose glasses and looking under them. "What an amazingly fine specimen. Such perfect continuity of pigment discolorations! Marvelous! Simply *marvelous!*" Dropping his bag and umbrella, he fumbled around in his coat pocket, finally producing a long-handled magnifying glass, his use of which set everybody to laughing.

"Hey!" scowled Red, when the magnifying glass was turned on his nose. "How do you fit in?"

"Marvelous!" the bent-over newcomer repeated. Then he sort of teetered in a half circle, doing some more magnifying on the other side of the "specimen's" nose.

I quickly got Red's ear.

"He isn't making fun of you. Find out who he is and what he wants."

"MARVELOUS!" THE BENT-OVER NEWCOMER REPEATED.

Mr. Blighty wasn't missing any of the added entertainment.

"Is he so small, Purfessor," the old man cackled, "that you've got to use a magnifyin' glass on him to find him?"

The stranger carefully returned the glass to his pocket.

"A most remarkable case, sir," he beamed. "I have seen nothing to equal it in years."

"Yep," waggled the Tutter man, cocking an amused eye at Red, "he's a case, all right. He's what you call a *hard-b'iled* case."

"In its hygienic trespass, the pigment formation has functioned in the corium with apparent abandon, to the result, as you can see, sir, that the patterning is perfect."

Phew! Talk about a walking dictionary! I didn't wonder that Mr. Blighty looked dizzy.

"Say, stranger," says he, scratching his head, "what be you-all talkin' about, anyway?"

The newcomer raised his shaggy eyebrows in surprise.

"Sir! You first spoke familiarly. I thought you had recognized me, and hence was conversant with the nature of my selective researches."

"Nope," Mr. Blighty spit.

"Then permit me to formally introduce my-

self, sir. I am Professor Aldercott Maxmillion Pip, A.B., M.A., Ph.D."

"I swan to Peter! A man with a name like that! It hadn't ought to be allowed," and the joker cackled at his own words.

"I am a scientist, sir," came with a touch of pride, "as my degrees mutely bear evidence."

"Astronomy?" Mr. Blighty spit again.

"No, sir. Lentigo."

"Never heerd tell of it."

"Lentigo, sir, is the scientific name for freckles."

"Freckles, huh?"

"With all due modesty, sir, I justly claim to be the world's leading authority on freckles. This fascinating study of mine has led me into deep researches, and now promises to pay me bounteous rewards."

"Meanin' which?" Mr. Blighty hitched his good ear forward.

"I have every reason to believe, sir, that within a fortnight it will be my privilege to release, into the hands of mankind, under an appropriate trade name, a positive corrective formula for Lentigo, or, in more common words, a complete cure for freckles. One application of my Mir-

acle Mud, sir, and the objectionable pigment discolorations will vanish from the corium overnight, never to return."

Mr. Blighty slapped his knees.

"I swan to Peter! Do you hear that, Donald?" he got the red-headed one's attention. "The Purfessor is goin' to take the freckles out of your colorium an' make you beautiful."

"Yes," the freckle specialist beamed, "it is my earnest hope to be favored with the helpful assistance of this young gentleman in the conclusion of my important experiments."

I again got Red's ear.

"Don't you catch on, you dumb-dora? He wants to *experiment* on you."

"Go lay an egg," says Red. "This is the only face I've got. And I'll be blamed if I'm going to let *him* monkey with it."

"But he'll improve it for you," I grinned.

"He won't," says Red, "if I see him coming."

But when it was explained to the freckled one how easily he could earn a dollar a day, his interest picked up considerably. For, to a kid, a dollar is a dollar. And what if he did have to wear a mud plaster on his face now and then? Mud has never hurt anybody yet.

Well, say, I didn't know whether to laugh at the silly-acting old scientist, or take him seriously. A freckle specialist! Of all the crazy junk! Still, I sensibly checked up in my mind, a freckle specialist wasn't any queerer than a *bunion* specialist or a *tonsil* specialist. Certainly, if his Miracle Mud was a success, he'd get a fortune out of it. For millions of freckled people would buy it.

I little dreamed of the crazy, shivery, bewildering events that were to follow on the heels of Professor Pip's appearance in Tutter with his "Miracle Mud." Gee-miny crickets! The thought of that mysterious yellow face, as it later spied on us, night after night, gives me the creeps to this day.

CHAPTER V

A TREE WITH A COW'S HEAD

A FELLOW needs to use a lot of tact in selling soap. I soon found that out. Starting off with a lot of pep, I pulled my first boner, so to speak, at the home of Mrs. Robinson in Chestnut Street. After one look into her cluttered kitchen I figured that here was the best soap prospect in town. But when I offered to demonstrate on her dirty floor, she got as mad as hops. Golly Ned! I sure made fast tracks out of *there.*

Then I further got in bad at Mrs. Peghorn's home in the next block. A big fat woman, with an arm on her like a prize fighter, my regular line of gab didn't interest her a-tall. Noticing a mangy-looking poodle parked beside the kitchen stove, I wound up by saying, resourcefully, that my laundry soap was also good for fleas, cooties, lice, bedbugs, and so on. *Wough!* When I saw her start for the broom, I wisely beat it. For I could tell by the look on her face that she meant business.

As a whole, though, I had a very successful day. At five-thirty I turned in my share of the jack, the total of which came to almost a hundred dollars. In his great joy over our success, Mr. Lung brought out a big dish of Chinese candy, which looked like burnt pretzels smothered in goose grease and tasted like asbestos pancakes. But you should have seen *him* gobble the junk down!

"Jelly and Ploppy all-e same-e smart boys like whip," he bragged on us. "Make-e ol' Sam glad like Melly Clistman day. Now ol' Sam help-e Jelly and Ploppy sell 'um gloldflish."

To make sure that our goldfish were all right, and hadn't further walked off on young Rainbow's stringer, we dropped in at Mrs. Warmley's place that evening, where the unexpected news was dished out to us that Professor Pip had rented her old conservatory.

"He calls it his laboratory," the old lady spoke of the deal with a smile. "This afternoon he and the Meyers boy worked for hours brushing down cobwebs and repairing broken windows. See!" she proudly held up a ten-dollar bill. "Here is my first month's rent."

"Good for you," laughed Poppy.

"At first, his interest in the old greenhouse rather surprised me. It didn't seem to me that he could be in earnest. But it was explained to me that he needed exactly such a secluded place to carry on his experimental work. So we came to terms. And I have agreed to board him, too."

Poppy didn't say anything to that. But his eyes held a curious look as he met the speaker's eyes, which showed, plainly enough, what his thoughts were like.

"This morning after you left," the old lady went on in explanation, "I had quite a battle with my stubborn pride. And I've come to the sensible conclusion that I must do more to help myself, rather than depend on you boys for everything. In fact, I felt ashamed of myself, on reflection, to think that I had given your practical suggestion so little consideration. And now that I have taken in one stranger, I'm wondering if I can't advertise in the Chicago newspapers and thus get in touch with a few more select prospects, some one, possibly, who, worn out, needs the rest of a quiet place such as this; or even a convalescent."

Poppy's eyes were lit up like peeled onions.

"I think that's a dandy scheme," he gave his

opinion. "Boarders of that kind won't attract much neighborhood attention. In fact, it will be taken for granted that the newcomers are guests of yours."

"Yes," nodded the old lady, her cheeks flushing, "I thought of that."

We worked out the advertisement for her, promising to mail it on our way home, after which, for the first time, we were shown through the big house. Talk about a maze of *rooms!* The wonder to me was that we didn't get lost. Many of the big rooms, of course, were kind of shabby, as the paper had been on the walls for years. The woodwork, we were told by the proud owner, was solid walnut. Following her up the wide, winding stairs, I had the peculiar feeling that I was in an enchanted castle. And could any one have better fitted the part of a story-book character than this pleasing little old lady in her old-fashioned sweeping silk dress! We were shown furniture a hundred years old—dinky little French chairs with bowlegs and pincushion backs; English dressers with towering mirrors and marble tops; huge bedsteads, the ornamental headboards of which seemed to scowl at us in the dim light. There were many curious

corner cabinets, too, and a library, the books of which, for the most part, were much too thick and somber-looking to interest me.

I could see, all right, why the little old lady didn't want to take everybody into her home. But, as she had said, a few very select out-of-town boarders would fit in nicely. Certainly, I thought with a smile, this was exactly the proper place for the queer-acting freckle specialist. We could hear him teetering around in his room on the second floor. And on the way downstairs the house owner asked us, curiously, if it were true, as she had been told, that he was working on a cure for freckles.

"What a peculiar occupation," she laughed softly, when we had told her all we knew about the stranger. "But then," her thoughts carried her along, "the man, himself, is very peculiar. I hardly know how to take him."

Red Meyers gave us the high sign when we crossed Hill Street.

"Have some," he gurgled, shoving a sack of jaw breakers at us, out of which he had generously stuffed his own face.

"Evidently," laughed Poppy, loading up, "you weren't kept waiting for your first day's pay."

"It's wonderful to be rich," Red jingled his money. "I'm thinking of giving away Fords."

"How do you like your new job?" I asked him.

"Lovely," came the juicy gurgle. "We're going mud hunting to-morrow."

It was then explained to us by the assistant freckle specialist that his employer was in need of a certain kind of yellow mud.

Poppy laughed.

"Tell him to try the Weir marsh in the river bottoms, where we dug up the pirate's gold cucumbers. For there's plenty of mud down there."

That gave Red a thought.

"Say, Poppy," says he quickly, "do you know of an oak tree in the Weir marsh with a cow's head?"

"Sure thing," grinned the fun-loving leader. "I've even heard it bellow. And one of its horns is pink with green spots."

"Cuckoo!"

"It has an elephant's trunk, too," came the further nonsense, "and its bark sounds like a fox terrier."

"Haw! haw! haw!" Red unhinged his bazzoo. "That's a good one."

Poppy was curious.

"What made you ask about the oak tree?" he inquired.

"Because that's where the yellow mud is."

"In the tree?" I piped up innocently.

"Haw! haw! haw!" bellowed Red. "That's another good one."

"One more cackle like that," threatened Poppy, "and the show troupe will take up a collection."

"Time out," gagged Red. "I swallowed a jaw breaker."

"Just so it wasn't a paving brick," says I cheerfully, "or a wash tub."

Getting his wind, the assistant freckle specialist then explained what he meant by a "tree with a cow's head." The foliage of the oak tree had peculiarly grown in that odd shape. And it was near this tree that the mud hunters were going to begin their work.

"Of course," Red wound up, "if plain mud was all we wanted we could find it any place. But, as I say, we need a special kind of mud."

"Evidently," says Poppy thoughtfully, "the Professor must have been in these parts before, or else he wouldn't be so well acquainted with the shape of our river-bottom trees."

"No," Red shook his head. "A man in a Chicago hospital told him about the funny-shaped oak tree. The Professor was at the hospital when the man died."

"This is getting mysterious," Poppy laughed.

"The man said he found the yellow mud near an oak tree with a cow's head. He put a gob of the mud on his freckled cheek, where a bee had punched a stinger into him. And when he squinted at himself in the mirror that night there wasn't a sign of a freckle on that side of his face."

"After which, I suppose," Poppy couldn't quite swallow the story, "he went back to the oak tree and put some of the magical mud on the other side of his freckled face."

"He didn't get the chance to go back. For that night he was taken down with appendicitis. They rushed him to Chicago. And two days later he was dead."

The leader studied the freckled face for a moment or two.

"Red," he finally inquired, "is this true?"

"I have the Professor's word for it."

"An oak tree with a cow's head!" laughed Poppy. "I bet you never find it."

CHAPTER VI

POPPY'S WONDERFUL SCHEME

MOTHER called me three times the following morning, threatening, the last time, to douse me with a dipper of cold water if I didn't immediately pile out.

I let her think that I was still tired from my soap-peddling job. The truth of the situation was, though, that overnight I had peculiarly cooled off on the goldfish scheme. A fellow hates to be laughed at. And I could imagine how everybody up and down School Street would give us the hee-haw when the news got spread around the business section that we were trying to sell dollar goldfish.

There might be some truth to Poppy's notion that dollar goldfish would get more attention than ten-cent goldfish. But, even so, I didn't believe that we could sell enough goldfish, at a dollar a throw, to make the business pay. As a matter of fact, the demand for goldfish isn't very heavy, anyway. And of the few real prospects

who happened along, the big majority would end up by buying where the price was the lowest. That's human nature. Certainly, you don't catch *me* paying a dollar for something that I can buy, in another store, for ten cents.

Yes, sir, as I say, my eyes were open now. I saw just how impractical the scheme was. And I found myself wondering, in further troubled reflection, how a boy as bright as Poppy Ott could have been so completely misled. Of course, in one way, it was fine and dandy of him to talk about helping Mrs. Warmley. As a matter of fact I wanted to help her, too. But there was no sense in letting our noble intentions, as you might say, completely upset our good judgment. To that point, if the leader wanted to do something helpful, why didn't he get her permission to auction off the goldfish for whatever they would bring? There was possibilities in that scheme. But there was no sense in attempting the impossible.

However, don't get the idea from the foregoing that I intended to desert Poppy altogether. I guess not! If he was bound and determined to go ahead with the crazy scheme, I'd do my best to help him. That's the kind of a pal *I* am. It

would be just as well, though, I sensibly concluded, to keep away from him for a day or two. If he needed me, he knew where to find me. And there was a happy chance, of course, that my lack of interest in his scheme would sort of bring him to his senses.

As for Mrs. Warmley, she'd soon have plenty of money coming in from her boarders. So she would be all right. Moreover, it probably would please her to keep the treasured goldfish and pay back the two hundred dollars. So Poppy would come out all right, too.

Red Meyers breezed in while I was stowing away the cornflakes and flapjacks.

"Hi, Jerry. How are you fixed for rubber boots?"

"I've got an old pair in the attic," I told him.

"Think they'll fit me?" he shoved out his canal boats.

"Sure thing."

"Then, if it's all right with you, I guess I'll borrow them. For there's no telling how much junk I'll have to wade through while we're searching for that crazy tree."

"You want to look out," I grinned, "that you don't sink in the mud over your head."

"If I do," says he, "I bet Aunt Pansy will be sorry. The mean old thing—I'd just like to see her bawl her eyes out."

"What's the rumpus now?" I grinned.

"Oh, she's been blabbing stuff to Pa. And he's on his high horse."

"If the reports about you and your window-washing work are true," Mother spoke up, "the wonder to me is that your aunt didn't skin you alive."

The thought of the preceding day's fun set Red to grinning.

"Well, anyway," says he, getting back to his old free-and-easy way, "the dove of peace will be cooing around our bay window when I get home. For I'm going to surprise Aunt Pansy with a pail of yellow mud. She can use it in her beauty parlor."

"I suppose," smiled Mother, "that you're living in hopes that the Professor's freckle cure will be a success."

"I'll tell the world. This morning when I got up I squinted in the mirror. And I tried to imagine what I would look like when the miracle had been performed. Sweet limburger! Can you imagine *me* without freckles, Mrs. Todd?

Like a toad with warts—huh? And the best part is that it won't cost me a cent. I'll even get paid for having it done to me."

"Well," says Mother, "I hope for your sake that everything turns out all right. And I hope, too, Donald," came stiffly, "that the next time you wash your aunt's store windows, you'll be more of a little gentleman. For nobody likes rough-talking boys."

"I guess you wouldn't say that," I spoke up quickly, "if you knew how mean young Rainbow is to us. Only yesterday he socked Poppy on the head with a dirty cob."

"If he ever bounces anything more at me," Red pushed out his hard mug, "I'm going to turn his liver into a livery stable."

"You and me, both," says I.

Well, as I say, I stuck around the house all morning. And when Poppy didn't come over to see me, or call me up, I found myself wondering, in growing curiosity, what he was doing.

Two o'clock found me peeping through his alley fence, having been dragged there, as you might say, by my compelling curiosity. No one was in sight. Taking careful aim, I shied a pebble at the kitchen door. Still no signs of life

from within. Circling to the street, I saw that the front doors were closed too.

Knowing about the goldfish, it was a natural act for me to light out for the Hidden House. And here I met a kid hauling a big parlor aquarium on a coaster wagon.

"Poppy Ott borrowed it from Mrs. Warmley to use in his new store," Tommy Hegan told me. "Isn't it a darb? See the old castle. I bet it'll look swell—huh?—when we get it filled with goldfish."

Well, to tell the truth, I wasn't surprised. Somehow, in the back of my beezer, I had known all the time that Poppy would stick by his scheme. Old do-or-die! That's *him,* for you. Every time.

Right then and there I sort of resigned myself to my fate. For I saw how useless it was to hold out. If the leader had the nerve to see the crazy scheme through, I told myself, I'd stand by him, doing my part, failure or no failure. Let the people laugh, if they wanted to. I should worry. But if young Rainbow laughed—gr-r-r-r-r! What I'd do to *him.*

Keeping pace with the talkative Hegan kid, I sort of steadied the big aquarium while he

pulled. Presently we came to Hill Street, with the Chinese laundry just ahead of us. And here my eyes picked up a big cloth sign. I'll draw it out for you:

The Freckled Goldfish! What did the leader mean by that? Certainly, I checked up in my mind, he had said nothing about a "Freckled Goldfish" to me.

"Hi, Jerry," the worker met me in the laundry doorway, as bright-eyed and as happy-looking as though he had just inherited a million dollars.

"You're just in time. For we're going to open up in a few minutes. Here, Tommy," he gave his attention to the kid, "pull your coaster wagon inside. Atta-boy! Now let us lift the aquarium into the window. Pretty heavy, huh? Don't let it skid, old timer."

I saw at a glance that Poppy had been putting in some busy hours. But the arrangement of things, for the most part, didn't make sense to me. For instance, one side of the laundry had been curtained off, with some of Mr. Lung's Chinese draperies, into a sort of room. And when I peeped in, there was three of Mr. Ott's best parlor chairs, a rug that was quite as familiar to me as the chairs, and an equally familiar table. Also there was a sort of waiting room, separated from the back of the laundry by two potted palms. Classy stuff, all right. But it certainly wasn't what I had expected to see.

Putting the Hegan kid to work carrying water for the aquarium, the leader then drew me into the curtained room.

"How does it look to you, Jerry?" he grinned happily.

"Well," I evaded, not wanting to hurt his feelings, "if it's your idea of what a goldfish store should be, I suppose it's all right."

"It isn't a regular store," says he gravely.

"So I notice," says I, sort of dry-like.

"The point is, Jerry, that we've got to use special selling methods. Ten-cent-store methods are all right for ten-cent goldfish. But not for dollar goldfish. I realized that from the start. And getting down to business last night I worked out my 'Freckled-Goldfish' scheme."

"Where did you get the idea?" I looked at him curiously. "From P. T. Barnum?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I read one time that Barnum painted white stripes on a donkey and made people believe it was a zebra. So I thought maybe you were going to pattern after him and paint freckles on the goldfish."

"Cuckoo! Even if we could do that, and get away with it, it would be dishonest salesmanship."

I asked him then if the "Freckled Goldfish" was the name of the store.

"No," he grinned, "it's the name of our secret lodge."

A secret lodge! Boy, that sounded like a lot of fun to me. So, as you can imagine, I listened with sharpened ears while he dished out the whole program.

"Poppy," says I, when he had finished, "you're a wonder! And to think that I wasted a whole morning trying to discourage you! Some one shove me a swift kick."

"I wondered where you were," he further grinned.

Now that I had a line on his scheme, I was anxious to start the fun.

"Let's take Dad first," says I.

"All right. Ask him to come down here at three-thirty, if he will. But whatever you do, Jerry, don't give the scheme away. No, sir! Keep him curious. It was largely curiosity, you know, that made a success of 'The Bat.' For people who saw the play wouldn't give the mystery away. And that made other people curious to see it. Let's hope our 'mystery' scheme works out as successfully. After your dad, you might round up Mr. Meyers. I'll see my own pa. There's old Mr. Blighty, too. He'll help us. For every year he gives away hundreds of dollars to the poor."

Tommy Hegan stuck his head through the curtains.

"The aquarium's all full, Poppy."

"Fine!" says the leader. "Now, if you wish,

you can run over to Mrs. Warmley's house and get a pailful of goldfish. She has a dip net that you can use. But don't handle the fish without first wetting your hands."

Hurrying out of the store together, the younger kid skinned across Hill Street while I swung south, in the direction of the Tutter brickyard.

CHAPTER VII

THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH

I SUPPOSE it's perfectly natural for every boy to hang onto the notion that his pa is the most wonderful pa in the whole world. Take Red Meyers. He growls around like a bear with a sore head whenever his pa shakes him up. But, even so, he wouldn't swap pas with me for a million dollars to boot. And as much as I admire Mr. Meyers, as a neighbor, I wouldn't swap pas with Red for *ten* million dollars to boot.

What brings my pa and I so close together, I guess, like two peas in a pod, is his great interest in me. When I was a little shaver, with a broken kite, it was just as important to him to see that the kite was properly fixed, as it was to run his brickyard. In fact, when I needed help, the brickyard stopped, so far as he was concerned. And to-day he gives me the same undivided attention. Any time I have a matter to talk over with him, he drops everything to listen to me.

And if I need help, I get it. To a point of spending money, he doesn't dish out as many dimes and quarters as some dads I know, for it's his notion, I guess, that too much spending money is a bad thing for a growing boy. Nor does he let me take the car and rant all over the country, like young Rainbow. But I have as good clothes as any boy in town; I have everything I need to keep me well and happy; I have a dandy home; and, best of all, I have his complete confidence.

One time I read a book called "The Prince and the Pauper." It sure was a peachy book. But I didn't like the part where the pauper was forever getting beat up at home. That didn't seem real to me at all. For my pa's only idea of a strap is something to sharpen his razor on. If I ever did get a whipping at his hands, I think I'd be so ashamed of myself that I'd never want to look him in the face again. Of course, like most boys, I sometimes slip up on minding him. But he never jumps on me. He sort of makes me feel that I'm not playing the game fair. And that hurts, let me tell you. It's something I don't forget very soon.

Which is a lot for me to write down about my dad. But I want you to know him just as he is,

not only because I'm proud of him, and love him seven ways for Sunday, but because of his connection with my story.

"Well, well," his face lit up, when I appeared at the door of the brickyard office, "see what the cat dragged in."

I sat down on Grandpa Todd's old desk, which will be *my* desk, I'm told, when I'm big enough to help run the business.

"Say, Dad," says I, grinning, "are you a pretty good friend of mine?"

"I haven't heard," says he, returning my grin, "that we've had a falling out."

"Will you help me with a little scheme?"

"I ought to," says he earnestly, "for last week you washed the car for me."

"It's really Poppy Ott's scheme," I admitted.

"Well . . . that doesn't lessen my interest in it."

"Poppy and I are trying to do a good turn. It's a kind of unusual scheme. And to get started right we need the help of four men. I've picked you and Mr. Meyers. And Poppy has picked his pa and old Mr. Blighty."

"What am I supposed to do?" came curiously.

"We want you to come down to the Chinese laundry at three-thirty."

"A sort of committee meeting, huh?"

"No," I grinned. "Poppy is going to introduce you to the Freckled Goldfish."

"What's that?" he quickly searched my face.

"You'll be surprised," says I.

"Is this some joke, Jerry?"

"No."

"And you really want me to come down to the laundry?"

"At three-thirty," I nodded.

"Have I your word," he pinned me down, "that it's a matter of real importance?"

"It's a matter of *big* importance," I told him.

"But why can't you give me an idea of what is expected of me?"

"You'll be surprised," I said again.

"I hope," was his quiet reply, "that I won't be disappointed."

"It's a big honor," I grinned, "to be introduced to the Freckled Goldfish."

"Maybe I should wear my other collar," he joked.

"The collar's unimportant. But be sure and bring two bucks."

I had to dish out a somewhat different line of gab to Red's pa.

"Mr. Meyers," says I, as a starter, "I guess you know who I am."

"I ought to," he smiled, "for, as your godfather, I had to cough up a ten-spot for a silk-lined baby blanket the day you were born."

"I guess you know Poppy Ott, too," says I.

"Slightly."

"He started a stilt factory."

"So I heard."

"And then he started a pickle factory."

"Yes, I believe I heard something about that, too."

"Don't you think, Mr. Meyers, that the business men ought to have a great deal of confidence in a boy who has that kind of stuff in him?"

"They should," came the admission.

"And as a business man, yourself, if you were told that Poppy and I were trying to do a good turn, you wouldn't refuse to give us a little help, would you?"

"Possibly not."

"Very well, Mr. Meyers. We'll be ready for you at the Chinese laundry at four o'clock."

"What do you mean by that?" says he quickly.

"We're going to introduce you to the Freckled Goldfish."

"But why pick on me?" he inquired after a moment.

"Because you're a good fellow. And when you understand what our scheme is, we know you'll help us, the same as Dad."

"Oh! . . . Is he in it, too?"

"Sure thing."

"And I'm not to know what you want of me until I come to the laundry?"

"You'll be surprised," I grinned.

"Well, I'll call up your dad and see what I can find out from him."

"You'll be surprised," says I again.

Hurrying back to the laundry, I got into the Chinese robe that Mr. Lung was contributing for the occasion, together with other stuff. Boy, it sure was some classy outfit, let me tell you. There was a dragon in front, done in gold braid, and each baggy purple-silk sleeve was decorated with a gold moon.

Interested in our scheme, the laundryman stopped his work to help me.

"Jelly look-e like li'l' China boy plince," he patted the robe here and there, his big slippers going slop! slop! slop! as he moved around me in a circle. "Fleckled gloldflish lot of flun.

Jelly and Ploppy got 'um click mind. All-e same-e smart like whip."

While I was dolling up for the big show, Poppy breezed in with the good news that he had successfully lined up his father and old Mr. Blighty. Then we went up in front, the leader taking his station in the curtained room, and me sort of posing beside the door. To tell the truth I felt kind of foolish. For a lot of people passing by paused to rubber through the window. "Laws-a-me!" one old lady stretched her neck. "If he had a dirty face, I'd say it was the Todd boy."

Dad came in at the appointed time. And when he got a good look at me and the rest of the scenery, he saw, all right, that his time wasn't going to be wasted.

"Fleckled gloldflish all-e leady," I made a sweeping bow, which, of course, was a lot of fun for the kids at the front door. Then I gravely drew aside the curtain.

"Mr. Todd," says the leader, when the visitor was seated, "a very important honor is about to be conferred upon you."

"So I am beginning to suspect," says Dad, taking in his surroundings with curious eyes.

"Upon invitation," Poppy went on with his solemn lingo, which, of course, was largely memorized for the occasion, "you are about to be introduced to the Freckled Goldfish, to thus become a Good Fellow in the secret order bearing that name. You probably know what a Good Fellow is."

"I think so."

"A Good Fellow," the leader saw fit to explain, "is a man who enjoys helping his less fortunate neighbors. And so, from your fine record here in Tutter, you've been chosen to head the list of Good Fellows of our honorable order."

"I thank you," says Dad soberly, thinking, I guess, that this was pretty deep stuff for two boys to get up.

"One of your duties, as a member of the order, will be to bring in suitable candidates—men who have already proved themselves Good Fellows. For we need men we can trust. And as it will now be explained to you, so also will it be explained to them at the proper time, that the purpose of this organization is to help an old lady, who has successfully hidden her peculiar poverty for years. We can't give you her name. But we trust you will be none the less willing to do

your part as a Good Fellow. Have you complete confidence in us, Mr. Todd?"

"I have," says Dad promptly.

"And are you willing, from what you know of us, to rely on our judgment and trust to our honesty?"

"I am," came just as promptly.

"Then you are in every way eligible for membership. Here is the registration book. Please write your name, after which you will be required to deposit two dollars with the Keeper of the Door."

Getting the two bucks, I then brought in a pair of goldfish in a ten-cent globe.

"Your possession of these goldfish, Mr. Todd," the leader went on, "will identify you as a member of our honorable order. To all outsiders they will appear to be ordinary goldfish. But within our informed brotherly circle it is known, of course, that they are *freckled* goldfish."

"I understand," grinned Dad. "The freckles are there, but we can't see them."

"Exactly," nodded Poppy. Then he made a "swimming" motion with his right hand. "This is the secret sign of the order," he gravely in-

formed. "For all ordinary purposes it should be written like this:

But when used as a sign of distress the lines should be straight:

"And now, Brother Good Fellow, having been initiated into the mysteries of our honorable order, we shall depend upon you to forever keep its secrets, and by so doing thus arouse the curiosity of the uninitiated."

"I understand," came the continued grin.

Well, that sort of concluded the initiation. And passing out of the little room, carrying his two "freckled" goldfish, Dad gave my hand a squeeze, which is his way of letting me know, without saying it aloud, how proud he is that I belong to him. He thought it was pretty fine of us, I guess, to go to all this fuss to help a poor old lady.

Just then Mr. Meyers came in.

"What is it, Todd?—some kind of nonsense?"

"You'll be surprised," says Dad. Then, giving me a wink, he ran around the room, making the "swimming" sign. Gee, he looked funny!

"Boy," says the prospective candidate, "I hope it doesn't affect me that way."

"You'll be surprised," says Dad again.

"Well, lead me to it. I guess I can stand it if you can."

To explain our later success, I should mention how loyally the first four members stood by us. Dad, I am told, even made a speech in our favor before the Chamber of Commerce. And that largely explains the business men's confidence in us. We were doing a good turn, they were told, and hence were deserving of their support. Then, too, the business men had a warm spot in their hearts for old Poppy. Through his earlier work, they had come to have unusual confidence in him. And that was a big help.

As can be imagined, there was wide talk about the "Freckled Goldfish." Even in a much larger town than ours, the stunt that we were putting on would have gotten special attention. Curiosity drew dozens of people into the store. The kids who hung around began calling me "One Lung" in pattern of the laundryman. And one

morning when we came down to the store our sign looked like this:

Young Rainbow's work, of course! We hadn't any doubt about that. Later that day he slipped into the laundry when we were busy and dropped a big turtle into our aquarium. We had a dickens of a time getting it out. Mr. Lung kept it for soup, to be fattened first, in Chinese style, on raw liver.

Well, in all, we initiated eighty-two members, including Professor Pip. Then we took down

the curtains and put on a big sale, pricing the goldfish at fifteen cents apiece or two for a quarter. Altogether we took in two hundred and sixty-eight dollars. And Mrs. Warmley still had goldfish left!

To tell the truth I was kind of glad when our big sale came to an end. For the business was taking up all of our time. And I was beginning to long for a good old dip in the swimming hole, with nothing to do till to-morrow, as the saying is.

Mr. Lung, though, didn't like to see us leave.

"Pletty soon," says he, "Jelly and Ploppy come back and sell 'um fleckled gloldflish some more."

"No," I told him, rolling up the cloth sign, "we're through for good."

"Fleckled gloldflish make 'um blisness men laugh," he nodded. "So Jelly and Ploppy come back. Pletty soon, too. You see."

There was a peculiar twinkle in his eyes. I wondered at it. And afterwards I remembered it.

CHAPTER VIII

HIDDEN EYES

LEARNING that I was now a gentleman of leisure, as you might say, with no business to attend to, Dad invited me to take a ride with him the following morning. And while we were spinning down the bumpy river road in the direction of the Killdeer clay pit, where the driver had business, who should percolate into the summer scenery ahead of us, as dusty-looking as the road itself, but the junior mud hunter. Wearing my big rubber boots, and all bent over under the weight of a spade, he sure made a sorry-looking picture. I had to laugh.

"How would you like to ride for a change?" grinned Dad, stopping.

"*Me* ride? Oh, no!" and the physical wreck made a frantic lunge for the car as though he was afraid it would evaporate before he could get his eager hands on it. "Sweet gasoline can!" he sank into the cushions beside me. "This is heaven."

"Where's your boss?" says I curiously.

"Him?" came the quick scowl. "Say, I'd like to tell him to his face just what I think of him—the old dumb-bell!"

"What's the matter now?" I grinned.

"Oh, as usual, he got halfway to the river bridge before he remembered about the spade. Yesterday I had to go back to town for the pail. And the day before that he forgot the lunch."

"You ought to take inventory before you start out," says I, with a further grin.

"Better than that," says he, "I'm going to quit."

"Don't be foolish," says I. "Remember that you've got a lot of freckles to get rid of. And there's no sense in wasting good money on the job when you can get it done for nothing."

"Aw, shucks," came wearily, "I'm sick and tired of looking for that crazy tree, anyway."

"It's queer," says I thoughtfully, "that you can't find it."

"Yes," says he quickly, "and I can tell you something queerer than that, too."

The peculiar change in him excited my curiosity.

"What do you mean?" says I.

"Yesterday I saw a pair of eyes."

"Where?"

"In the swamp."

"Probably a crocodile," says I, in nonsense.

"A crocodile your granny. It was a man."

"Well, what of it?" says I, after a moment. "You don't own the swamp."

I could see, though, that he was peculiarly worried.

"I wish that you'd go along with me to-day, Jerry."

"What for?"

"Maybe you can find out who the man is."

"Detective stuff, huh?"

"Sure thing."

I didn't take him seriously until he told me that the hidden spy had been on the job for several days."

"I kept hearing twigs snap, and things like that, which proved, all right, that my notion of hidden eyes wasn't purely imagination. Still, I wasn't particularly scared until I caught sight of him. And then . . . sweet carbolic acid!"

"I can feel your heart thump," says I, as he leaned against me.

"Boy, your heart would thump, too, let me

tell you, if that hidden geezer ever gave you the same kind of a daggery look that he dished out to me."

"What does the Professor say about it?" says I curiously.

"*Him?* He think I'm cuckoo, I guess."

"Well," I grinned, "maybe you are."

"Jerry, I actually heard things. I saw a pair of eyes, too. For some unknown reason we're being watched. And whoever the spy is, he hates us like poison."

"If anybody's watching you," says I, putting my wits to work, "it's some other mud hunter like yourselves."

"I have the feeling," he showed further uneasiness, "that it's something deeper than that."

"The Professor ought to know," says I.

"Jerry, outside of freckle stuff, he doesn't know beans."

"Did you ask him if he had any enemies?"

"No."

"It may be some one who is watching him to steal his idea."

"That's exactly what I said. But I couldn't get it through his head at all."

"Maybe," I then picked off a slightly different

theory, "it's some one hiding here to evade the law. An escaped bank robber, for instance. A criminal like that would hate to have you around. For he'd be in constant fear that you'd spot him and sound the alarm."

Red pushed a pair of shining eyes at me.

"Boy, I hope it is a bank robber. For then we can capture him and get a big reward."

Him capture a bank robber! I had to laugh.

"We need old Poppy," says I, "for a stunt like that."

But he kept on coaxing me. So finally I agreed to go along with him, not with the thought of doing any capturing stuff, though, but to sort of reconnoiter, or whatever you call it.

Asking Dad to drop us at the river bridge, we followed a dirt road leading off to the right, presently coming within sight of a gaunt stone house the most noticeable feature of which was a huge chimney. This was the old Weir house, featured so prominently in my book, POPPY OTT'S PEDIGREED PICKLES. Further on we could see the thicket that marked the beginning of the treacherous jungle, which also bears the old pirate's name.

In wet weather horses and cows have been

known to sink completely out of sight in the Weir marsh, leaving not a single trace behind them. And particularly is the place dangerous when the near-by river is high in its banks, which sort of lends proof to the local theory that the waste land, with its numerous bogs and deep water cuts, has an underground connection with the big stream.

There is a dense growth of trees throughout the swamp, mostly oaks and willows. And at this time of the year the marsh hay comes up to a cow's back. A swell place, all right, for a man to hide in.

We found the Professor sitting under a haw tree making notes in a small leather-backed book.

"Where's the pail?" says Red, taking quick inventory.

The vague eyes were lifted from their work.

"I beg pardon? . . ."

"The pail," says Red. "P-A-I-L, pail. The thing with a handle on that we carry mud in."

"My word! Where *is* the pail?"

"You had it last."

"So I did. I remember distinctly."

"If you've lost it," Red tore his hair, "it can stay lost for all of me. For I'm sick of chasing

around after your old truck. The wonder is to me that you can keep track of your false teeth and your shoes."

"My word!" murmured the bewildered freckle specialist. "What an extraordinary remark."

"Don't pay any attention to him," I tried to make up for the other's poor manners. "His gab is mostly bunk, anyway. Here's the pail behind the tree."

They went off then in the direction of the swamp, the booted one bordering on collapse under the weight of the spade and pail while the other, with the lunch box tucked under his arm, stopped every few steps to jot down matter in his notebook.

I had been instructed to wait here until I got my chum's signal. Then, when it was known to a certainty that the peculiar spy was on the job again, I was to close in on him, in similar secret work, thus finding out who he was, after which, of course, we would sort of decide whether or not he needed capturing.

An hour dragged by. Then I caught sight of a wisp of smoke deep in the swamp to the right. So I set out. And now that I was actually headed into the wild place, a hazard at any time with its

bottomless pools and treacherous paths, but now doubly dangerous, I don't mind telling you that I was kind of scared. But I gritted my teeth, which is a good way, I've found, for a boy to get his nerve back. And after a few moments the queer shivery feeling sort of let up on me. Yet how much like snakes were the grapevines, I thought, as they wound themselves around and around the limbs of the trees. And probably, to that point, a good many real snakes, almost as big, had their beady eyes on me as I crept through the bushes and tall grass. Br-r-r-r! The goose pimples kept coming up on me in spite of all that I could do.

The jungle, as it now stretched out on all sides, was full of animal life. I saw enough squirrels and blackbirds to make a hundred pies like the one that was set before the king. There were birds of bright colors, too—the trees were alive with them. Once a rabbit sprang up under my face as I crawled along, scaring me half to death. Standing in a shallow pool watching for frogs was a huge heron, with a body as big as a goose and legs three feet long. Boy, he sure was a beauty. Quiet as I was in my movements I think he heard me. For he acted uneasy. Then,

catching sight of a luckless frog, he cut the water with his long bill. I had a queer feeling as I watched the frog go down the captor's gullet. I could imagine, sort of, that there were dangers here big enough to gobble me down in much the same way.

Passing the pool, I was turned back by a dense blackberry thicket. And it is well that I swung off to the right in going around this thorny tangle, for presently I caught the sound of a voice directly ahead of me. It was Red Meyers singing "Yankee Doodle." The old blood pumper sure was pounding now. For this song of my chum's was a signal for me to go slow and keep my eyes peeled for the spy.

Not knowing whether the man was between me and the mud hunters, or beyond them, I started in a circle, intending to gradually close in. Then all of a sudden I caught sight of something ahead of me in the bushes. It was the spy, all right! I could see his hat, set well back on his head. I could see the top part of his coat, too.

My job now, of course, was to get close enough to the secret watcher to see his face, thus identifying him for possible later work. Risky for me,

all right, notwithstanding the fact that Red and the Professor were cooking an early dinner less than fifty feet away. So I kept on, crawling along on my stomach, with just the tiniest kind of a peep-hole through the grass. Fifteen feet . . . twelve feet . . . ten feet. I stopped then, waiting for the man to turn.

Two—three—five minutes passed. It was queer, I thought, that the spy should stand so still. Just like a statue. Then I tumbled to the truth. It wasn't a man at all—it was a stump fixed up with a hat and coat. And all the time I had been creeping up on the dummy the real spy probably was similarly creeping up on me.

Who was he? What peculiar powers had he to thus spot me long before I had a chance to spot him? What was his object in spying hatefully on the mud hunters? And, in final, granting that he now had his evil eyes on me, what was liable to happen to me if he caught me?

I saw, all right, that I was no match for him. And to save my hide I sprang up and lit out.

"My word!" cried the amazed Professor, as I tumbled headlong through the bushes into the middle of the mud-hunters' dinner table. "How precipitous! I fancied at first, with instinctive

trepidation, that we were about to be attacked by some ferocious denizen of the forest."

Red coughed up a pickle that had slipped out of his fingers and down his throat at sight of me.

"Did you see him, Jerry?" he finally got his voice.

"No," I shivered, "but he saw me."

I told him then about the dummy. But when we guardedly crept through the bushes to take a peek at the figure we found only a naked stump. The hat and coat were gone.

CHAPTER IX

THE SLEEPING DWARF

Professor Pip couldn't see any sense in our subsequent mad flight to safety. He showed in his stiff actions that he was all out of patience with us over his interrupted work. But we didn't let that hold us back. I guess not.

And how funny the old man looked as he teetered along behind us like a bouncing caboose on the end of a runaway train. Scared as I was I had to laugh.

Getting him safely to the big haw tree in front of the stone house we left him there to the further study of his notebook and lit out for town to round up Poppy Ott, for my experience, added to Red's, proved conclusively that things were going on in the swamp that needed investigation.

It was two-thirty when we hit town. And suddenly remembering that I had missed out on my dinner I stopped in a grocery store to buy some crackers and cheese, where I found Bill Hadley completing a list of stolen goods, a thief having

gotten into the store some time during the preceding night with a skeleton key.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell the marshal about the man in the swamp. But on second thought I decided to keep this to myself until I had talked with Poppy Ott. For if a reward was offered there was no reason why we couldn't capture the law breaker as well as Bill, thus claiming the money and later splitting it between us.

We found Poppy doing a pearl-diving stunt in the dish pan, for he and his pa do their own housekeeping for the most part, which is one reason why it's so much fun to go there.

"Did you know," says I, tumbling in on him, "that Onstad's grocery store was robbed last night?"

"Sure thing," he slopped the dishes around.

"How would you like the job of helping us catch the thief?" says I.

"What's that?" says he quickly, taken by surprise.

"We know who he is," says I.

"He's hiding in the Weir marsh," Red put in. "I saw him yesterday while the Professor and I were mud hunting. And his eyes are like coffin nails."

Poppy put a quick finish on the dish-washing job.

"All right," says he, drying his hands on the kitchen towel, "let's hear about this geezer with the coffin-nail eyes."

Red told his story. And as I watched the leader's face I could see that he was peculiarly interested.

"But if you saw the man's eyes, Red, surely you must have seen his face, too."

"No," the freckled mud hunter shook his head. "He was peeping through the grass. All I saw was two piercing eyes."

"And you don't know whether the peeper is white or black?"

"No."

"How did you know he was watching you today?"

"I heard him. So I signaled to Jerry with the dinner fire. And then I tried out my vocal talents on the Professor."

"All right. Now, Jerry, let's hear your story."

I told how I had crept through the swamp, after getting the "smoke" signal, never dreaming that the spy would spot me, only to learn in the end, with my nose against a stump as it were,

that the man seemingly had had his eagle eyes on me all the time.

"Queer," says the leader, screwing up his forehead.

"We thought at first that the man was an escaped bank robber. But I guess he's only a common sneak thief, after all. For a bank robber, hiding out on the law, wouldn't be foolish enough to break into a grocery store and thus run the added chance of capture."

"He might," considered Poppy, peculiarly reflective, "if he was hungry."

"Let's get a posse," was Red's suggestion, "and surround the swamp."

"No," the leader shook his head. "A more important job, as I see it, is to find the 'cow' tree."

That was a queer thing for him to say.

"Why don't you talk about taking a trip to the moon?" says Red. "There is no such tree."

"You may have overlooked it."

"Kid, I've made googoo eyes at every tree in that swamp. I know them all by heart. But the one kind of a tree that isn't there is a 'cow' tree. The story is a pipe-dream, to my notion."

"To show its odd shape," reflected the leader,

"a tree such as that would necessarily have to stand by itself and not be crowded in by other trees."

"All right," Red huffed up. "If you're so dead sure it's there, go find it."

Poppy grinned.

"Which means that I'm to get no help from you, huh?"

"So far as doing any more tree hunting is concerned," the freckled one laid it off with his hands, "that swamp and yours truly have kissed each other a fond and final farewell."

I got the leader's eye.

"What's your idea in taking such a sudden deep interest in the 'cow' tree?"

"Jerry," came thoughtfully, "even more than you and Red suspect, there's a peculiar mystery piling up around here. The Professor didn't come to town alone. Spies were sent here to watch him. And the object, of course, is his freckle cure. I can think of nothing else of equal importance. So, as I say, to sort of bring matters to a head, as it were, the thing for us to do is to find the 'cow' tree, thus supplying the scientist with the yellow mud that he needs to complete his experiments, after which, I suspect,

events will take their own exciting course."

Red's eyes were sticking out.

"Gosh!" says he, with visions of spies in his head. "You've got me scared."

"It isn't surprising," says Poppy, digging deeper into his thoughts, "that some big commercial interest should greedily fasten a secret eye on the promised freckle cure. For there's millions in it. And how simple for a dishonest concern, at the last moment, to jerk the secret out of the helpless hands of a foggy old man."

I was staring.

"And you thought of all this," says I, "since we came in?"

"No," he grinned. "But from what you've told me I've been able to quickly piece things together. For instance, there was the man with the yellow face. When I caught sight of him at our window last night I never dreamed, of course, that it was your mysterious swamp man. But those eyes! . . . Boy, he sure gave me the creeps for a moment or two. It must have been the same man."

"But why should he be watching *you?*" says I, growing more puzzled every minute.

"That's what I'd like to know. It was pretty

late. Around midnight, I guess. I was sitting over there reading a book. Suddenly I had the queer feeling that I was being watched. You know how it is. I looked up. And there in the window was the yellow face."

"A Chinaman?" says I quickly.

"I think so."

"But it was no Chinese outfit," says I, "that I saw in the swamp."

"Oh, the man had on regular American clothes. Well, as you can imagine, I did a good job of locking the doors and windows. Yet sometime during the night the key was pushed out of the lock of the front door. Was the man in the house? Nothing seems to be missing. But the thought that he might have stood over me in my sleep, to a queer purpose, gives me the cold shivers."

"Quit talking about it," chattered Red, "or I'll shake my back teeth loose."

"And you really think," says I, studying the leader's face, "that the man unlocked your front door with a skeleton key?"

"Why not? We know that a skeleton key was used on the grocery-store door."

"If that's the case," says I, a queer helpless

feeling stealing over me, "he probably can unlock any door."

"Yes," nodded the leader, "I dare say he can."

"Sweet funeral blossoms!" squeaked Red. "I'm going to ask Bill Hadley to let me set up a bed in the town jail."

"As I say," the leader went on, "I never connected the yellow face with the Professor. Nor did I suspect that the hidden enemy had stationed still another spy in the same house with the old scientist when Mrs. Warmley told me about the sleeping dwarf."

"The which?" says I, staring at him.

"Red," the leader suddenly remembered himself, "this is a secret."

"Shoot," came the quick nod. "You can trust me."

"At our suggestion," it was then explained to the freckled one, "Mrs. Warmley advertised in the Chicago newspapers for select boarders, to make money, mentioning the fact that she would particularly like to get in touch with people who needed rest and quiet. Last Monday morning she got a telegram from a Chicago doctor asking her if she would consider taking charge of a boy who was recovering from a peculiar case of sleep-

ing sickness. Having been promised big pay she wired back that she would. And that night about twelve o'clock the doctor got her out of bed, having driven down from Chicago since noon, the patient sleeping on a bed in the back part of the car. To her amazement the 'boy' was in reality a Chinese dwarf. I dropped in to see her this morning and she told me the whole story. Well, right off I thought of the yellow face that I had seen at the window. Could it be, I pondered, that the dwarf, out of his mind, was wandering around town at night peeping in people's windows? No, she told me, the newcomer hadn't been out of his room. To make sure, though, I got her to let me take a peep at him, thus learning, for a fact, that it wasn't the same face at all."

"Did he know that you were looking at him?" says Red queerly.

"How could he," says Poppy, "when he was asleep? Well, I didn't give the matter any further thought until you fellows came in with your story. But now how plain everything is to me! Two Chinese spies, one a man with daggery eyes and the other a dwarf."

"But how can the dwarf be a spy," says I, bewildered, "if he sleeps all the time?"

"But *does* he sleep all the time, Jerry? That's what I'd like to know."

"You said he was asleep," reminded Red, "when you looked at him."

"He appeared to be asleep. So without proof of some kind I haven't any right to assume that he wasn't."

As I say, I have a lot of confidence in Poppy Ott. And knowing what good use he makes of his wits I have a great deal of faith in his theories, too, however wild they may seem at times. So I didn't try to argue with him that this new theory of his was literally too amazing to be true.

Maybe he was right, I thought. Maybe the dwarf *was* a spy. And the other Chinaman, too. But what a peculiar course for the master mind to take in his hidden plot. Somehow it made me think of big-bodied spiders and sleek-eyed things in watery caves.

It would be best, we agreed, not to alarm Mrs. Warmley. But to make sure that no harm came to the old lady we decided to keep close to her until the mystery was solved.

The thought, though, of spending the night in that rambling old house, with its strange tenants and probable crowding dark secrets, didn't perk

me up for two cents. I guess not. I had the feeling that something spooky was going to happen. And, as you will learn in reading the following chapters, something spooky did happen.

CHAPTER X

THE NEW SECRETARY

Poppy had agreed to see Mrs. Warmley about letting us stay at her place all night, Red concluded, so at the supper table I told Mother not to leave the front door unlocked for me as I wouldn't be home until some time the following day.

"And you better see that both the front and back doors are bolted, too," I cautioned.

"Yes," Dad spoke up, "I understand that there's a burglar in town."

"It's a Chinaman with a skeleton key," I told them. "And if you don't bolt the doors, as I say, he'll get inside and go all through the house while you're asleep. For that's what he did at Poppy's house last night."

Dad looked at me quizzically.

"Do the authorities know that the housebreaker is a Chinaman?"

"*We* know it," I grinned.

"And who are *we?*" he continued his quizzical look.

"The Tutter post of the famous Juvenile Jupiter Detective association," I laughed.

"Oh! . . ." he smiled. "You and Poppy Ott, huh?"

"And Red Meyers," I appended.

Mother looked worried.

"Just what kind of silly detective work are you boys planning to do to-night?"

"Poppy is the leader," I evaded. "You'll have to ask him."

"Are you going to stay at his house?"

"No. We're going to stay with an old lady."

"Who do you mean?"

"Mrs. Warmley."

"Has the burglar been in her house, too?"

I knew, of course, that one of the Chinese crooks was actually living in the Hidden House. But I couldn't very well tell my folks so. For that was a detective secret.

So I got rid of Mother's question by explaining briefly that Poppy and I were going to do some work for the old lady. Nor did Dad keep me in hot water, as you might say, by asking me if I meant "detective" work. I could see, though, that he was wise. His eyes showed it. And under their continued curious glance I began to

wonder uneasily if he had further tumbled to the fact that the "poor old lady" of our earlier "Freckled-Goldfish" scheme was in reality the reputed wealthy property owner. But whatever his suspicions were he didn't say anything. He sure is dandy that way. Whenever he sort of gets a line on me he always waits for me to bring the story to him of my own accord instead of trying to pry it out of me. Which bears out the point that I made in an earlier chapter about him trusting me.

Washing up in the kitchen later on I overheard Mother and Mrs. Meyers gabbing about the proposed new public library that the Tutter club women were working for, in connection with which they hoped to stir up greater local interest in books and the like by bringing a famous author to town.

"As I say," wheezed Mrs. Meyers, "it's perfectly disgusting to me how some of the wealthy people in this town hang onto their money. They seem to have no civic pride at all. . . . Are these some of your new pickles, Mrs. Todd? They look *so* tempting."

"Try one," says Mother.

"There's the Pindills on Hill Street. Simply

rolling in money. And by every right in the world they should have headed our subscription list with a five-thousand-dollar pledge. But you know what we got, instead."

"Three hundred dollars," says Mother.

"My dear, it was only *two* hundred dollars. . . . Don't you think you should have added a trifle more sugar?"

"Mr. Todd doesn't like his pickles too sweet."

"And there's Mrs. Warmley. Has *millions* of dollars hid away, I'm told, but *she* wouldn't give a penny. Not a single *penny,* mind you. Imagine that!"

"I understand," says Mother, "that she is a very miserly woman."

"Aren't people of that stamp perfectly disgusting to you? Personally I don't believe in being extravagant; but on the other hand I want to live well and get out of life all the enjoyment that I can. That's what money is for. . . . Had you noticed any improvement in my complexion? Pansy has been using some of her imported facial clay on me. I'd hate, though, to pay the full price for it—twenty dollars a *pound,* mind you."

Mother laughed.

"I don't know whether I could afford to have my complexion improved at that price or not."

"Speaking of facial clay," the visitor laughed in turn, "have you heard about Donald's new job?"

"I understand that he and Professor Pip are searching for yellow mud."

"You'd realize, all right, that they were searching for *mud* if you could see the tracks in that boy's room. All that's needed to make the place look like a regular pigsty is a few husks scattered in the corners."

"I'm wondering," says Mother, "if the freckle cure will be a success."

"If it isn't, Donald's heart will be broken. He even asked me the other day if he could have a bigger mirror in his room. Imagine! And I heard him say something to his father about going to the photographer's in a week or two. You can see where his thoughts are. His sister already calls him a sheik. And yesterday when they were having their usual daily knock-down-and-drag-out I caught him pegging talking machine records at her. Caruso and Galli-Curci, mind you, at four dollars apiece."

"Donald needn't worry about his freckles," says Mother. "For when he's dressed up he looks very neat indeed."

"Did you ever know a boy with freckles who

didn't hate them like poison? There was my brother Fred. He never was much of a hand to swear. But I could always tell when he was looking at himself in the mirror, for he said—"

Crash! went a cup on the floor.

"Oh, isn't that too bad," sympathized the talkative visitor. "One of your best bluebird cups, too. Well, I'll have to be going, as Mr. Meyers is waiting for me. He's having trouble again with his feet. First one swells up and then the other. So to-night we're going over to Ashton to see a chiropodist, who is very good in his work, I hear, but terribly high-priced. Isn't it sinful the money we have to spend on our feet and faces nowadays to keep up a respectable appearance?"

Sort of tagging Mrs. Meyers home, as it were, I picked up Red, according to earlier agreement, and then the two of us lit out for down town where we waited on the laundry corner for the leader.

Usually open in the evening until nine o'clock, the laundryman's place to-night was strangely closed. And when we rattled the front door, just for the fun of it, he came out as mad as hops, even swearing at us.

"What in time is the matter with *him?*" stared Red, surprised.

That's exactly what I was wondering. The Chinaman wasn't acting like himself at all. Instead of showing the usual warm friendship for us, he seemed to hate the sight of us.

"What have you done to Mr. Lung?" says I, puzzled, when the leader came along.

"Nothing that I know of," the newcomer showed surprise at the question. "Why do you ask that?"

I told him then how the laundryman had boiled out of the front door at us.

"What the dickens? . . ." Poppy showed bewilderment. "Is *he* mixed up in this Chinese tangle, too?"

Gosh! I hadn't thought of that.

"Sweet chop suey!" squeaked Red, staring with bulging eyes at the closed laundry. "I guess I'll quit while there's a chance of saving my life."

"I don't believe that Mr. Lung would do anything crooked," I showed my loyalty. "For in the two years that I've known him, until to-night, he's been a kind friend. Nor did I ever hear a word said against him by anybody."

"The Chinese are a peculiar race, Jerry,"

Poppy spoke reflectively. "They're bound together in queer ways. And one of them is frequently made to help another."

"But even if the laundryman *is* working with the spy," says I, dizzy-like, "why should he turn against us?"

"You might just as well ask me why the other Chinaman looked daggers at *me* through the window. It's all to the same point: As I told you this afternoon, there's things going on around here that we know nothing about. We have our theories, of course. But theories very often miss the mark. And it may be the same in this case."

"Poppy," says I, with a queer chilly feeling in my backbone, "this is getting gosh-awful deep. It may pay us to take out a little extra life insurance."

"Yah," piped up Red, "and while we're about it, let's mosey over to the undertaking parlor and pick out our caskets."

Poppy walked up and down the street looking toward the laundry. Then at his suggestion we all went around in back. But the laundryman's small drying yard was deserted. And as though to shut out prying eyes the curtains were closely drawn at the living-room windows.

There was some peculiar secret here, all right. We could not doubt that for a moment. And the uncertainty of how it connected up with the rest of the mystery, in which we seemed to be involved, filled us with vague uneasiness.

About to leave the alley we caught the sound of a muffled, guttural voice.

"Too much-e soup. Everywhere too much-e soup. Nibs! Nibs! Where's Nibs?"

It was the Chinaman's macaw calling the turtle that had been trained to eat liver out of its owner's hands, only, of course, the strange talking bird had peculiarly gotten the "soap" and the proposed "soup" mixed up.

"Nibs! Nibs!" came the voice again, followed by a gurgling scream, which sounded for all the world as though the bird was being choked to death. But we heard it again, safely talking to itself, as we turned into the street.

It was now bordering on eight o'clock. The sun had gone down. And out of the crowding bushes, as we followed the winding path to the Hidden House, came weird creeping shadows. But however sure we were that those same hidden eyes were watching us, no attempt was made to molest us. Even less, we saw not a single moving shadow that could have been mistaken

for a man's. If the daggery-eyed spy was here, as we suspected, he certainly was keeping himself well out of sight.

Red was hanging to me like a leech.

"I have a hunch," says he in a hollow voice, "that I ought to drop a farewell postal card to my pa and ma."

"Brace up," grinned Poppy. "It isn't you they want—it's the Professor's freckle cure."

"Just the same," says Red, in his crazy way, "I feel that I'm heading into my fatal doom, as Romeo told Joan of Arc when they brought the bull into the arena."

We could see a light in one of the corner rooms on the second floor.

"That's where the dwarf is," Poppy told us in a low voice. "It used to be Sidney Warmley's room."

"Who's he?" says Red quickly.

"Mrs. Warmley's only son. She hasn't heard a word from him since the day he ran away from home, more than thirty years ago."

"Did his pa lick him?" then came the kiddish question.

"No. He got into trouble, as I understand it. And if he hadn't run away he probably would have been arrested."

Everything was dark in the old conservatory. But, even so, I gave the glass-walled building a curious glance as we rounded the corner of the house. Little did I dream, though, of the exciting things that were going to happen in the freckle specialist's "laboratory" before the night was over.

Mrs. Warmley came to the kitchen door with a worried face, telling us that she was still waiting supper for the tardy boarder.

"He went away this morning," she spoke nervously, "and I haven't seen a thing of him since."

That kind of scared us. Still, I held my tumbling thoughts in check, there was less probability that the scientist had been murdered by the unknown enemy than that he was lost. With all my heart, though, I hoped that he hadn't wandered back into the swamp. Imagine anybody caught in that perilous hole in the dark! Br-r-r-r!

"If I were you I'd clear the supper table," Poppy advised the disturbed landlady, "for the chances are that the Professor is eating downtown to-night." He didn't believe it, of course. But it was like him to want to set the old lady's mind at rest.

While Mrs. Warmley was clearing the table

the front door bell rang. We all thought, of course, that it was the returned Professor. And what a grand and glorious feeling of relief. But this feeling changed quickly to one of amazement when we caught the sound of a familiar bossy voice.

"My mother and I came over to buy some of your old junk," said a boy in the doorway.

"I am Mrs. Flossie Ringbow, the owner of 'The Charm' beauty parlor," then came gushingly from the elder of the two unexpected callers. "And this is my son, Chester. We've called to see some of the interesting old furniture that you're credited with owning."

"Yah," says smarty, "some of your old junk."

"Chester dear, don't be rude."

Poppy gave my hand a sharp squeeze, which in itself told me how he itched to take the insolent young puppy by the coat collar and run him into the street. Then the leader stepped into sight.

"Good evening, Mrs. Ringbow," he bowed politely, with a voice that was all honey and cream. "If you'll step inside, please, I'll be very glad indeed to show you Mrs. Warmley's keepsakes. We feel greatly honored by your interest in them."

At this lingo, coupled with the speaker's sur-

prising appearance, smarty's eyes stuck out like halved onions.

"We didn't come here to have *you* show us anything," says he, instantly on the defensive.

"It is my duty to take visitors through the house," says Poppy grandly, and he looked for all the world like one of those stiff-backed English butlers that you see in the movies. "I'm Mrs. Warmley's private secretary," he added, in the same grand dignified way.

CHAPTER XI

PROFESSOR PIP'S MUDDY RETURN

WHAT got Poppy Ott's goat quite as much as young Rainbow's insolent gab was the way the nervy beauty-parlor owner took it for granted that Mrs. Warmley's old-fashioned home was a sort of neighborhood side-show. Seemingly it never had occurred to the business woman to *ask* if she could go through the interesting old house. Oh, no! It was to be remembered that *she* was Mrs. Flossie Ringbow—from the city, mind you. And, of course, whenever Mrs. Flossie importantly snapped her metropolitan fingers, as you might say, feeble old ladies with prized family keepsakes and everybody else in small-town clothes were supposed to jump obediently through a hoop.

Once in a while you'll meet a woman like that. But such people, let me tell you, add mighty little to the happiness of the world. For not only do they hog all the cream, but it sort of gripes them to see others get even the skimmed milk. I've

known a few kids of the same stamp. And, to that point, as I have mentioned, young Rainbow was built in perfect pattern of his mother. They both needed taking down a peg or two. And secretly watching the beaming "private secretary" as he gently closed the front door, I had the happy hunch that some such scheme was now on foot.

If you have read about the time in the "Galloping Snail" book when Poppy impersonated the heiress you know what a clever actor he is. Boy, I sure yipped my head off that night. Poppy in lace petticoats, mind you! And now, as I say, I had the happy feeling that he was up to much the same kind of nonsense. Such a kid! He jumps into stuff like this, to help worthy people, without a moment's preparation. And he always gets away with it, too.

He wisely brought a chair for Mrs. Warmley, to whom, as you can imagine, the unexpected "private secretary" stuff had come as considerable of a shock. But the bewilderment in the old lady's wrinkled face quickly gave place to a smile when the trusted one got into high gear with his flowery gab. And, to that point, who wouldn't have smiled? Red and I, as we listened

out of sight, almost died. Considering the circumstances I never heard anything so funny in all my life.

The show began in the lighted front parlor.

"This," grandly gestured the castle guide, lifting his voice, "is the Gold Drawing-room, of resplendent historical associations, for it was here, at this very table, that Abraham Lincoln and George Washington made the first typewritten draft of the Declaration of Independence."

"Go lay an egg," scowled smarty, who plainly had his own ideas about who wrote the Declaration of Independence. "You aren't funny."

"Possibly," the guide maintained his grave dignity, "you have heard of 'Paul Revere's Ride.'"

Mrs. Flossie, of course, hadn't expected to be entertained in this fashion. But though she showed surprise she had too big an opinion of herself to suspect for a single moment that any boy, much less the Ott trash of whom she had heard so much through her perfectly correct son, would try to make a monkey of *her,* though, to that point, she wasn't long to be left in doubt.

"No," says she sweetly, putting some of her own cleverness to work on the side of her son so as not to have him entirely eclipsed, as you might

say, "we never heard of 'Paul Revere's Ride.' What is it?—a poem?"

"It may surprise you to learn," came gravely from the guide, "that Paul Revere and Longfellow arranged the whole thing in this very room, even to the details of the horse's bridle."

"How interesting," purred Mrs. Flossie, with a kind of green look in her icy eyes.

"Permit me to call your attention to some of the room's chief architectural adornments," the guide then lectured in continued dignity. "The magnificent fresco that you behold to your right over the imported Arabian fireplace is the work of that justly illustrious Greek sculptor, Sir Walter Raleigh."

"Are you sure," further purred Mrs. Flossie, feeling that she had nothing to fear in matching wits with a boy, "that it wasn't Christopher Columbus?"

"You will notice," the guide went on, gesturing grandly, "that one of the cherubs bears a most striking resemblance to Queen Isabella, as we know her in pictures. And how tender must have been the sculptor's innermost thoughts as he molded into stone the features of his beloved mistress."

"I hope," says Mrs. Flossie icily, "that you soon run down."

"If he doesn't," smarty shoved in his bazzoo, "I'll knock him down."

"Are you and your son particularly interested in frescoes?" the guide spoke down from his peak of dignity.

"Naw," smarty answered for his mother, "we aren't interested in *frescoes* or *dominoes* or any other kind of *'oes.'* "

"Oh! . . ." gushed Mrs. Flossie, flitting across the big room. "What a lovely old divan. Have you set a price on it?"

"Mrs. Ringbow," came gravely, "there is nothing in the house that we won't put a price on . . . for *you.*"

"Of course," the bargain hunter got down to business, "it isn't worth very much in its present condition."

But instead of being offended by this remark, Mrs. Warmley smiled as sweetly as you please, which showed how thoroughly satisfied she was to leave the situation in Poppy's capable hands.

"Please do not let my secretary urge anything upon you, Mrs. Ringbow," says the old lady, playing her part, "if it isn't exactly what you want."

Mrs. Flossie hardly knew what to make of that. For, like her son, she had taken it for granted that Poppy's "private secretary" talk was all bunk. He was doing it, she thought, to show off.

"If it is your wish, Mrs. Ringbow," the guide stood at attention, one hand resting on the back of the divan, "we will gladly put this piece aside for you."

"What do you consider it is worth?"

"Mrs. Warmley," the guide respectfully addressed his superior, though with a certain lofty air, "would you mind getting our official price list from the big library safe. You will find it beside your jewel casket."

Jewel casket! Gosh, I thought I'd die. And I actually had to stuff my whole fist into Red's big mouth to shut him up.

"Had you noticed this chair, Mrs. Ringbow?" we again caught the guide's grave voice. "It matches the divan. Both pieces have a very interesting history, dating back to the time of Peter the Great."

"I'd love to pick up a rare Adam-and-Eve piece," purred the antique hunter.

"I'm quite sure," the guide lost none of his graveness, "that we have nothing as old as that."

"How disappointing! Chester dear, try this chair of Peter the Great's and see if you like it."

"Junk," smarty jiggled up and down in the spring seat.

But mamma had her business eye on that particular chair, nevertheless.

"Have you set a price on it?" she inquired.

"We will gladly put it aside for you, Mrs. Ringbow."

"I asked you," came stiffly, "if you have set a price on it."

"Mrs. Warmley is getting our official price list from the library safe. . . . Here is a beautiful oil painting done in Shakespeare's happiest style. Like our Peter the Great set and the Queen Isabella fresco it has a very interesting history."

"Can that junk," growled smarty, with a dark face. "We didn't come here to study history."

"I'm not interested in paintings," Mrs. Flossie coldly slammed the door on further picture talk.

"Let us see then," the guide grandly crossed the hall, "what there is of possible interest to you in the Peacock Music-room. . . . Notice this rare old square piano, Mrs. Ringbow. Built of solid Wisconsin mahogany it has a very interest-

ing and romantic history, its harp strings having responded in golden harmony to the masterly touch of no less a genius than that great pianist Ole Bull."

"Shut up!" bellowed smarty, figuring, I guess, that in the house-owner's absence from the room he could yell as loudly as he pleased. "If you spring any more of that 'history' stuff I'll soak you."

"Chester dear, don't be rude."

"And how interesting to know," the guide affectionately touched the old instrument, "that it was through the aid of this gem of the music-lovers' art that the famous 'Lost Chord' was found, thus opening the door, as you might say, to our school of modern jazz."

"I'm not interested in 'gems,'" Mrs. Flossie turned her back on the famous relic.

"Yes," says smarty, motioning, "take it out in the alley and chop it up for kindling wood."

Red got my ear as he listened beside me in the hall.

"Boy, I sure would like to take *him* out in the alley."

Squinting guardedly into the room, I saw Mrs. Flossie drop her handbag on the center table.

"I might consider this piece," says she, looking the table over, "if the price is right."

"We will gladly put it aside for you, Mrs. Ringbow. You understand, of course, that we are reserving nothing in the house. Everything is placed at your disposal."

"But how much is it?" the buyer pressed.

"Mrs. Warmley will soon be here with our official price list. . . . Are you interested in old glassware, Mrs. Ringbow? These Egyptian vases have a very interesting—"

"SHUT UP!" bellowed smarty, mad enough to bite the head of a nail.

"Gee!" Red snickered in my ear.

"You shut up, too," I snickered back, "or they'll spot us."

"No doubt," the guide gravely addressed the antique hunter, "you have heard of Cleopatra?"

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Flossie pulled some more of her own clever stuff. "She is the Egyptian lady who poses for the Palmolive soap ads."

But the guide never blinked an eyelash.

"Cleopatra," he recited gravely, "was one of the world's most beautiful queens. And knowing the royal history of these vases who can say

that it wasn't in one of them that Moses hid the fatal asp."

"I might buy them," says Mrs. Flossie in further catty smartness, "if I was sure of getting the asp."

"Or a crocodile," put in the younger smart aleck.

"How about this corner chair?" the buyer then got her eyes on another piece.

"We will gladly put it aside for you, Mrs. Ringbow. As I mentioned before, there is nothing in the house, however dear and precious to Mrs. Warmley, that we are withholding. We want you to enjoy your pick of our complete furnishings."

The antique hunter then checked up.

"There's the divan and chair in the parlor—"

"I beg pardon? . . ." the guide stood stiffly.

"Well, then," snapped the woman, with angry eyes, "in the *Gold Drawing-room,* if that suits you any better. The four pieces probably will be all I care to buy just now. Still," she wanted to see the whole show, "what have you upstairs?"

"Some very rare old Kalamazoo bedsteads, Mrs. Ringbow," the guide beamed with pride. "One of them in particular, associated with the

death of that great author of juvenile classics, Horatio Alger, Jr., has a very interesting—"

"S-H-U-T U-P!" bellowed smarty.

"I'm not interested in bedroom furniture. But if you have any more small chairs—"

"Please step this way," says the guide, moving grandly toward the stairs. "As I mentioned before nothing in the house is being held in reserve, not even our small chairs. We want you to enjoy your pick of our complete furnishings."

"Don't say that again," says Mrs. Flossie irritably. "I know it by heart."

"This," the guide paused impressively on the lower step of the stairs, "is the Grand Staircase."

"So I suspected," came icily. "And I dare say it is all marked up with the rubber heels of Jesse James and other celebrities. But let's keep cool about it."

"Have you noticed the woodwork, Mrs. Ringbow? Solid black walnut, from Walnut County, Illinois. You probably hadn't thought of buying any solid black walnut this evening. But in case one of the steps or panels strikes your fancy, just speak up and we'll send for a house wrecker. For as I mentioned to you before—"

"I'm not interested in your black walnut," came angrily.

"Notice the beautiful winding banister. Isn't it a gem? Of course, we'd miss it. But if you want it we'll gladly rip it out for you."

"Are you trying to make fun of me?" the woman's eyes flashed.

"Mrs. Ringbow!" came in a pained voice. "How can you imagine such a thing? Me a mere boy! Besides, Mrs. Warmley would be grieved to have a servant show discourtesy to an *invited* guest. . . . Could you use a few of our doors and windows, Mrs. Ringbow? Much as we might need them next winter, especially the windows, we don't want to be selfish."

"You are either an impertinent smart aleck," came hotly, "or a young fool."

"Aw, come on, ma," smarty showed his hatred of the other boy. "Let's go home. I'm sick of listening to his gab."

"It will deeply grieve Mrs. Warmley, I know," says the guide in continued dignity, "if you leave here dissatisfied."

"Will you SHUT UP!" bawled smarty.

"Oh, yes," beamed the guide, "I just happened to recall that we have some very old shingles in the basement. Would you like to look at our old shingles, Mrs. Ringbow?"

"Insolence! Come, Chester."

"You think you're smart," the kid looked back in further hatred, as his mother took his hand and started stiffly down the stairs. "But *I* know that you came to town in rags. So you needn't try to act big around me."

"I'm sorry," the guide continued his pose, "that personalities have interfered with our business. We would like very much, Mrs. Ringbow, to sell you the Russian set and the other pieces that you picked out."

And, to that point, in spite of her anger and icy indignation Mrs. Flossie was very eager to possess the four pieces. In fact she had no intention of going away empty-handed. What mattered the smart talk of a boy, she thought, if she could gain her ends.

"Let us get the pieces together," was her crisp suggestion.

"With the greatest of pleasure," the guide complied, moving the furniture into the hall. "Four pieces," he then checked off. "Our Peter the Great divan and companion chair, our Napoleon Bonaparte ping-pong table and our Oliver Twist corner chair. Are you quite sure, Mrs. Ringbow," he turned to the antique hunter, "that there is nothing else this evening? The Egyptian

vases, for instance. As I mentioned before, they have a very interesting—"

"Oh," came hotly from the woman, "if you only realized how tiresome you are you'd shut up."

"I'd like to shut him up," Rainbow shoved out his mug.

Having gotten a slip of paper from the returned house owner the "private secretary" now walked around and around the four pieces, sort of humming to himself in his work. He made quite a job of it, looking each piece over carefully and then checking up on the slip.

"Well?" says Mrs. Flossie, unable longer to hold her patience.

"We will feel the loss of these pieces deeply," the secretary straightened, "but that shall not interfere with the sale, Mrs. Ringbow, if *you* want them."

"Are you *ever* going to tell me the price?"

"You are buying more than mere furniture. Each of these selected pieces has its own historical associations and each is peculiarly dear to Mrs. Warmley. So in depriving her the pleasure of continued ownership you, of course, will be willing to pay the price. . . . The Peter the

Great divan, Mrs. Ringbow, is priced, subject to your immediate acceptance, f.o.b., Tutter, Illinois, at $78,462.92. The companion chair comes a bit cheaper at $42,988.99. The Napoleon Bonaparte ping-pong table is yours for only $62,645.33. And the Oliver Twist corner chair comes at $38,466.55, a total of $222,563.79."

Well, say, you never saw a madder woman in all your life. She had schemed to work Poppy, figuring that with all his smart gab he didn't know any more about the real value of antiques than a copper doorknob. And here he was dishing out prices to her that would have crippled the checking account of Henry Ford.

Starting for the front door with her head up, she suddenly remembered that her handbag was in the music room. But when she went to get it, it was gone!

Here was a swell chance, Rainbow saw, to hang something on the hated leader.

"Don't you see what Ott's game is, ma?" came excitedly. "He and the old lady are in cahoots. All he took us upstairs for was to give her a chance to rob us."

Mrs. Warmley sank into a chair.

"Poppy," begged the weary woman, with hurt

eyes, "please see if you can find the handbag for them. It surely can't have been stolen."

"Fine acting," sneered Rainbow.

"Say, listen here," the leader swung around, with a voice that was harder than nails. "I've heard enough of your gab."

"Aw! . . . You can't bluff me, you *tramp!*"

"You can call me a tramp all you want to," Poppy spoke in a quick even voice. "You don't hurt me in the least. But you're not going to call this old lady a thief. Do you get that? One more peep out of you and I'll take you down on the floor and pound the daylights out of you."

"Poppy!" came faintly from Mrs. Warmley, gesturing for quiet with a trembling hand. "Please don't quarrel with him."

"Perhaps," Mrs. Flossie put in her icy voice, "my son should have withheld his accusations. But, even so, the fact remains that my handbag is missing and with it more than a hundred dollars in currency. I left the bag on this table. Plainly some one in the lower part of the house stole it while we were upstairs."

Just then Red sneezed.

"LOOK!" bellowed smarty, getting his eyes

on us. "It's that Red Meyers. I guess we know now who the thief is."

"Don't you dare to call me a thief," Red bellowed in turn, galloping down the hall.

Mrs. Flossie remembered about the soap battle.

"Oh! . . ." she made croquet arches of her painted eyebrows. "Are *you* here, too?"

"You're durn tootin' I'm here," Red danced around like a prize fighter. "And if you have any family affection for this sick-looking lollipop of yours you'd better put a piece of adhesive tape on him and hang him up out of my reach."

"Wind-bag!" says smarty, pushing out his hard mug.

"Go for him, Red," I urged.

"Two against one," sneered the enemy.

"Don't you dare to lay a finger on my son," Mrs. Flossie quickly stepped between the fighters.

"What do you want me to lay on him?" bellowed Red. "A club?"

"If you boys have my handbag," the woman then went back to her loss, "it will pay you to return it immediately and thus avoid later trouble."

"Jerry," says Poppy quietly, "did you steal her handbag?"

"No," says I.

"How about you, Red?"

"No," says Red.

The leader then turned to the business woman.

"Are you still of the opinion, Mrs. Ringbow, that one of them is the thief?"

"I'll call no names. But if my handbag isn't returned to me within two minutes I'll summon the police."

And that is exactly what she did do. Coming promptly to the house Bill Hadley put us through a sort of third degree, which, however, was more of a formality than anything else, for he realized, of course, that we hadn't snitched the handbag. And he was equally sure of Mrs. Warmley's honesty, too.

"It's that dum robber who broke into Onstad's grocery store," the marshal waggled. "The slick cuss, he must have got in the front door, an' out ag'in, without you boys seein' him."

So many things had happened in the past hour that we had forgotten all about the missing professor. But shortly after Bill left the house the old man teetered in through the front door. And

what do you know if he didn't have the nerve to park his loaded mud pail on our million-dollar divan!

"At last," says he, beaming at us with the muddiest face I ever saw in all my life, "fortune is my handmaiden."

Which was just his crazy way, of course, of dishing out the grand and glorious tidings to us that he had found the tree with a cow's head and with it the miraculous yellow mud that was to turn Red Meyers into a movie sheik and himself into a multi-millionaire.

CHAPTER XII

DOC LELAND'S STORY

HELPING Red tow the triumphant mud hunter upstairs to the bath-room I then hurried back to the lower hall where the leader, in good detective work, had made the amazing discovery that some one had been hiding in the music-room.

This sort of exploded Bill Hadley's theory that the thief had slipped into and out of the house during the time that the visitors were upstairs. Instead, the prowler seemingly had gotten into the lower part of the house during the early hours of the evening, hiding under the old-fashioned square piano and later making a clever escape through the front door while Red and I, with our backs turned, were squinting up the stairs.

Moreover, and most amazing of all, it wasn't the daggery-eyed Chinaman who had stolen the handbag, as everyone suspected, Bill included, but the dwarf. The tiny hand-and-knee imprints in the dust on the hardwood floor were proof of that.

Now hot on the trail we ran upstairs to the sick room, expecting, of course, to find an empty bed. Consider our amazement, then, to find, instead, Mrs. Warmley gently patting the invalid's pillows and otherwise doing her duty as a sort of nurse to make the sleeper comfortable for the night.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" cried Poppy, completely dumbfounded. "If we're right about him stealing the handbag, how in Sam Hill did he get back up here so quickly?"

"Maybe he never left the house at all," says I.

"But how else could he have escaped from the music room?"

Knowing the arrangement of the lower rooms I agreed with the bewildered leader that the only way the thief could have made his escape was through the front door. Yet here he was in his own bed, with every appearance of having been here all evening.

Mrs. Warmley came out of the room, quietly bolting the door behind her.

"Do you always do that?" says Poppy quickly.

"The doctor advised it," she nodded, passing on down the hall to the kitchen where we later heard her warming up the tardy boarder's supper.

Her statement about the bolted door put another crimp in our theory. For if the dwarf was kept locked in his room how had he managed to get downstairs?

Moreover, to a slightly different angle, what had been the Chicago doctor's motive in advising the housekeeper to put a new bolt on the outside of the patient's door, instead of trusting to the regular lock?

"Do you suppose," Poppy explored his head for an answer to the riddle, "that the dwarf goes in and out of his window with a rope?"

"And why not?" says I.

"But, even so, how did he get into the music room?"

"How did the other thief get into Onstad's store?" I countered.

"Jerry!" he turned a pair of big eyes on me. "Is it your notion that the daggery-eyed geezer really was here with his skeleton key?"

"Maybe the dwarf has a key of his own," says I.

Which would explain in a way why Mrs. Warmley had been told to put a *bolt* on the outside of the patient's door.

The other laughed.

"Let's go in and search him."

"We might not find his skeleton key," says I, "but he surely couldn't hide a rope on us."

"Or a handbag, huh?" the leader's eyes were warm.

"But what excuse are we going to make to Mrs. Warmley?" I studied the situation. "We can't very well tell her the truth. For that would scare her into cat-fits."

"Why tell her anything at all? She's busy in the kitchen."

"All right," I laughed. "Let's go."

The other got his eyes on a broom.

"Just the thing," says he.

"What are you going to do with it?" says I.

"Sweep, of course. What do house servants like us usually do with brooms?" he grinned.

"Poppy," I bragged on him, when he told me his scheme, "you've got a head on you like a tack."

We then went back to the dwarf's door, quietly slipping the bolt, the leader feeling around on the inside wall for the electric-light switch. I was glad when the lights flared up. For I had too many suspicions of the strange sleeper to want to be near him in the dark—

especially in a room so tomb-like in its silence as this one.

"Now," Poppy spoke up bossy-like, working his scheme, "take this broom and get busy. See that you do a better job, too, than you did in that last room."

"My back aches," I put on dolefully, taking a guarded squint at the deformed figure in the bed. "I'm not used to sweeping."

"Step lively now," ordered the boss. "And I'll follow you up with the dust cloth."

Swishing with the broom I got closer and closer to the bed. I could see the drawn face now. It was a Chinese face, all right. Small and wrinkled. Somehow the sight of it gave me the creeps. For it was a mystery in itself—a mask, as you might say, to the sleeper's real age.

"The poor little fellow," says Poppy, wiping his eyes at the bedside. "I feel so sorry for him."

"Me, too," says I, getting out my handkerchief in pattern.

"I hope he soon wakes up and gets well."

"Who is he?" says I, feeling that a little open curiosity wasn't out of place.

"He came from Chicago, Mrs. Warmley said. A doctor brought him here. The poor little thing."

"Yes," I kind of gurgled in my windpipe, like I was all choked up, "the poor little thing."

"How tiresome it must be for him lying here hour after hour, day after day."

"And night after night," I dripped sympathy in turn.

"If it was me I think I'd want a nice comfortable bed."

"Me, too," says I.

"Let's make sure that the sheets aren't wrinkled. For if there's anything I hate it's to sleep on wrinkled sheets. And I want to make the poor little thing as comfortable as possible."

The leader's scheme, of course, in fiddling around the bed as pretended house servants was to learn if anything was hidden in the covers. But we could find nothing. Nor was there anything under the bed, either, between the springs and the mattress. In dusting the upholstered chairs we turned them upside down. But all we saw inside of them was coil springs and upholstering hair.

"The poor little fellow," says Poppy, stopping

at the dresser. "Let's see if he has plenty of clean clothes for to-morrow." But there was no sign of a rope or handbag in any of the dresser drawers nor, for that matter, behind or under the dresser, either.

We further looked between the headboard of the bed and the wall. As for the old-fashioned carpet, even though we found it tacked down on all four sides, we went over it inch by inch. But much less than uncovering a rope long enough to reach to the ground we found not even a piece of wrapping twine.

"Well," says the boss of the sweeping and dusting crew, "I guess Mrs. Warmley can't kick on this job." And switching off the lights we closed the door and bolted it.

Shut away from the dwarf's eyes the leader showed his disapointment. Our failure to find the rope and handbag in the suspected one's room put a big dent in our theory. I began to wonder if we weren't all wrong in suspecting the strange dwarf of being a spy. True, he was a Chinaman. But that didn't prove anything. There might be no connection at all between him and the other Chinaman.

"Just the same," Poppy hated to completely

give up his theory, "I'd like to jab him with a pin."

"What for?" I grinned.

"To make sure that he isn't faking."

"He never moved an eyelash," says I, "all the time we were in the room."

"I wish we had some way of watching him on the sly," says the leader thoughtfully.

"How about the keyhole?" says I. "Even if the bed isn't in the right place we can move it."

"Hot dog!" I was given a hearty slap on the back. "Old Sherlock Holmes hasn't anything on you, kid."

"Look me over," says I in fun, brushing the pretended roses from my shoulders. "I'm an authorized Juvenile Jupiter Detective."

Here Professor Pip teetered grumpily out of the bathroom, his face shining like a polished red apple.

"My word!" says he indignantly, feeling gingerly of his cheek bones. "It's a wonder I have any skin left."

"Quit growling about it," says Red, stepping around as unconcerned as you please, "or I'll charge you extra for overtime."

We then learned that the freckle cure was to be tried out that night, neither the scientist nor his freckled assistant having the patience to wait until morning. And now that the big moment had arrived, as you might say, I wondered curiously if the old man's dream would indeed come true. Considering how foggy he was on most things it didn't seem possible to me that the world would get any such notable scientific gift from him. Moreover, the thought of Red forever losing his freckles was kind of disappointing to me. He looked all right to me as he was. I was quite sure I wouldn't like him any better with a beautiful face. In fact, I considered, I might not like him nearly so well. For always when I was around him I'd have the feeling more or less that he was a sort of scientific imitation of the real thing.

Satisfied that her boarder was safe in our hands for the balance of the night Mrs. Warmley pointed out a spare room to us, after which, weary and wan, she sought her own bed in another part of the house. Poppy, I noticed, followed her with anxious eyes, probably thinking of the day she had fainted on his hands. And it is well that he kept a watchful eye on her. For

thirty minutes later she asked us to call a doctor.

It was her nerves, Doc Leland told us, coming out of her room. They showed the effect of some severe shock. We told him then about the vanished handbag, explaining that the house owner couldn't get the worried notion out of her mind that the law, after all, might hold her responsible. Moreover, knowing how the neighbors felt toward her she dreaded their further unfriendly comments, for a few, of course, would be only too glad to peddle the story that she actually had planned the robbery herself in order to add a few more dollars to her already fat hoard.

"Worry like that is bad for a woman of her age," waggled Doc, wiping his big nose glasses on the bottom end of his necktie.

"She's seventy-six," Poppy spoke soberly out of his thoughts.

"Yes, I know. And on top of her advanced age I notice that she seems rather run down. Is she gettin' plenty of nourishin' food?"

"She lacks for nothing now," says Poppy quietly. "But I happen to know that two weeks ago she fared pretty slim."

"Humph! No sense in that," Doc waggled

viciously. "No sense at all. For she's got plenty of wealth. I haven't much patience with people who think more of hoardin' money than of properly takin' care of their health. . . . Are you boys goin' to be here to-night?"

"Sure thing," says Poppy.

"Well, look in on her now and then. And if she's awake give her a teaspoonful of the medicine in the blue tumbler. In case she drops asleep, though, don't disturb her, for sleep, I imagine, will do her more good than medicine. You can call me up in the mornin' and tell me how she is."

"Say, Doc," Poppy stopped the waddling visitor at the front door, "is there really such a thing in the medicine book as sleeping sickness?"

"Absolutely," the professional man waggled. "Fatal, too, in many cases."

"Is it catching?"

"Not in the same sense as smallpox or measles."

"If you had such a case you'd watch it pretty closely, wouldn't you?"

Doc didn't like that.

"I watch all my cases closely," he rumbled.

"But what would you think if a Chicago doc-

tor brought such a case to town and then gave it no further attention?"

"I'd think there either was somethin' wrong with the case or with the doctor."

"Is it a Chinese disease?"

"No. As I recall it originated in Africa."

"But there's no reason why a Chinaman shouldn't have it."

"None at all."

"Suppose I were to fake a case of sleeping sickness, Doc. And suppose further that I had the help of a crooked doctor. How would you go about it to show me up other than by jabbing a pin into me?"

The visitor chuckled.

"The 'mouse' method might work," says he.

"What do you mean by that?" Poppy showed quick interest.

"I used it on Miz Killman a short time ago. Contrary to people's notion that a doctor's main ambition is to run up a big bill, I got sick and tired of callin' on her, realizin' as I did that there was nothin' the matter with her except a bad case of laziness. 'Bill,' says I to her easy-goin' indulgent husband one evening when I caught him elbow deep in the family wash tub

—and this, mind you, after a hard day's work at the mill—'can I tell you the truth about your wife's condition without runnin' the chance of gettin' kicked out of here?' 'Is it her appendix, Doc?' says he, looking haggard. 'No,' says I, 'it hain't her appendix, nor gallstones, nor a floatin' kidney, nor leakage of the heart, nor water on the brain. It's a very simple ailment,' says I, 'and it starts with *L*. Shall I tell you, Bill, what it is?' 'Lumbago?' says he. 'No,' says I, 'laziness.' He got me to one side then so no one would hear us. 'Doc,' says he earnestly, like he realized that I was a friend in need, 'I've had the feelin' all along that Carrie was kind of puttin' on.' 'She eats reg'lar, doesn't she?' says I. 'Yes,' says he. 'She had two baked potatoes for supper and three fried sausages and salad and bread and butter and cake and coffee.' 'Well, Bill,' says I, 'what are we goin' to do about it?—keep on doctorin' her at an unnecessary expense to you, or sort of show her up and depend on her basic good sense to set things right?' 'Let's go in and talk with her,' says he, which we did. 'Carrie,' says he, with devotion in his eyes, 'I've got some good news for you. The doctor says you can have all you

want to eat, even mince pie.' 'Yes,' says Carrie, smiling wanly. 'And further,' says Bill, 'he's goin' to let you set up, figurin' that by the end of the week, dear, you'll be back on your feet as well as ever.' But that last notion didn't strike Carrie at all. For she was havin' too good a time loafin', with poor Bill workin' double shift. She let on that she hadn't strength enough even to lift her arm, much less to try and set up. That would be suicide, she said, hardly able to talk. Bill persisted, though, finally gettin' her feet out of bed—then over she flopped supposedly in a dead faint. Nor could we do a thing, with smellin' salts, cold water or anything else, to revive her. Suddenly I spotted a mouse scootin' across the floor. That gave me an idea. 'A mouse!' I yelled to Bill, prancin' around. 'Kill it! There it goes up the leg of the bed.' I began to bat the bedclothes then. And the first thing Carrie knew she was standin' on a chair in the kitchen . . . and she had got there all by herself, too. Well, that was my last call. I don't know how she and Bill patched it up. 'Tain't none of my business, anyway. The p'int is," the speaker wound up, "if you're ever in doubt about a sleepin'-sickness case jest remem-

ber about Carrie's mouse. I haven't took out a patent on the scheme, so you're free to use it. Good-night."

When the fat visitor had waddled out of sight down the winding path Poppy switched off the porch light and turned to me with dancing eyes.

"Jerry," says he, "what was it that we saw scooting around the cellar the day we lugged shingles?"

"Mice," I grinned.

"And what was it that we swept out of the dwarf's room?"

"A mouse-trap," I grinned some more.

"All right," he laughed. "Let's get the mouse-trap and get busy."

CHAPTER XIII

THROUGH THE KEYHOLE

HAVING set the baited mouse-trap at the foot of the cellar stairs, with high hopes of an early and fruitful catch, Poppy and I hurried back to the kitchen where the red-nosed star boarder was topping off his late supper with a piece of apple pie. And what do you know if young pumpkin-face wasn't hiding his freckled mug behind a similar slab of pastry. The big pig! I hadn't dreamed, in spotting the extra piece of pie, that he'd get in ahead of me. I never saw such a kid. All he thinks about is his stomach.

"Shake a leg," he dished out the orders, as though he was a young lord, "and see if you can scare up some cream."

Snap! went the trap in the cellar. And tumbling down the stairs, pleased over our early success, Poppy yelled at the top of his voice for me to get him a small box.

"Bring the mouse up here and shove it in Red's mouth," I yelled back. "It'll help to fill him up."

"Go lay an egg," the freckled one shoveled hard on the pastry.

"I hope it chokes you," I glared at him.

Poppy was still yelling. So I got an empty baking-powder can out of the cupboard and tossed it down to him.

"Look, Jerry," he held up the first squirming captive by the tail.

"What are you going to do with it?" Red draped his crummy mug over my shoulder.

"We're going to make a mouse *pie,*" I yelled at him, "and put *cream* on it."

"My word!" murmured the amazed Professor, teetering to the cellar door. "Who ever heard of a mouse pie?"

"Don't pay any attention to him," Red swaggered off. "For everybody knows they made a mistake when he was a baby and cut out his brains instead of his adenoids. . . . Where's the mud pail?"

In putting the furniture back to place in the front part of the house Poppy had carried the loaded mud pail to the kitchen, from where the two freckle specialists now disappeared with it through the back door, the younger one groaning, as usual, under the pail's terrific weight, and the

other one lighting the way down the graveled path with a sickly flashlight. Then, as I further followed their course through the moonlight, standing in the kitchen doorway, I saw them turn into the conservatory and switch on the electric lights.

Snap! repeated the trap.

"Four more," Poppy sang out, shoving captive number two into the baking-powder can, "and away we go."

At his suggestion I gathered up the supper dishes, putting them in a pan in the sink. Then when he came out of the cellar with the completed catch we beat it up the stairs.

On the way to the dwarf's room at the extreme end of the upper hall we looked in on Mrs. Warmley, finding her asleep. Somehow, though, she seemed to feel our presence beside the bed, for she stirred restlessly in her sleep. Her lips moved, too. And bending over her we caught the whispered name of her runaway son. "Sidney," she murmured. "Sidney, my dear." The poor old lady! Tears came to my eyes. And at the moment I kind of had the feeling that I wanted to run home and give Mother a big hug—to sort of let her know that we were still close together with no possible chance of a

separation such as this. Thirty years! Half of a lifetime, as you might say. And still the faithful old lady hadn't lost hope. Probably a dozen times a day she heard the expected one in imagination at the front door. I could sort of picture her in my mind running eagerly down the hall . . . only to learn, after all, in deadening disappointment, that it was a bill collector or some kid scouring the neighborhood for a crummy cat.

In that moment I longed for the magical power to make at least one wish come true. And could I have been granted such power I would have wished with all my heart for Sidney Warmley's return. Nor would it have mattered to his mother how gray-haired he was himself, or what his life had been. Shabby, dirty, disgraced even, he would still be her boy.

We tiptoed out of the room, Poppy no less sober than me. And pretty soon we came to the door of the dwarf's room which, as before, we unbolted and opened, quickly switching on the lights. But if we had hoped to surprise the pretended sleeper sitting up in bed, or even crawling over the window sill, we were disappointed. So far as I could see he hadn't moved a muscle.

For a crazy moment I wondered if he wasn't dead. But on second glance I saw that he was breathing.

"The poor little thing," says Poppy, bending over the bed. "I can't keep away from him."

"That's just the way I feel, too," says I.

"I keep worrying about him."

"You and me both," says I.

"I don't think Mrs. Warmley gives him as good care as she should. For instance if *I* were taking care of him I'd move his bed into the middle of the room on a hot night like this so that he'd get more of a breeze through the open windows."

"Now that you've mentioned it," says I, wiping my sweaty face, "I won't be able to sleep a wink to-night unless we do make him more comfortable."

"Come on," says Poppy, taking hold of one side of the bed.

"I'm with you," says I, taking hold of the other side.

The heavy bed creaked on its rusted casters as we moved it into the middle of the big room. And to make sure that it was now placed right for our purpose, the leader, with a knowing wink,

sent me after a fan, closing the door behind me. Walking off, I then tiptoed back to the keyhole and took a peek, finding that everything was lovely so far as the position of the bed was concerned.

Poppy went at me crossly when I came back empty-handed.

"You never do anything right," says he.

"How could I find a fan," I sort of whined, "when there wasn't any?"

"Well, never mind," says he impatiently. "He couldn't use it anyway, come to think of it."

We shut the closet door, wanting to give the mice as little free territory as possible. To much the same purpose the dresser drawers were closed, too. Then, sprinkling cheese on the bedspread, we guardedly dumped the mice out of the baking-powder can and hurried from the room, pretending to forget all about the burning light.

"Now," yawned Poppy, bolting the door, "let's go to bed and get some sleep."

What we did, instead, was to tiptoe back to the bolted door, hoping, of course, that the mice would soon tumble to the joyful fact that a nice cheese supper had been accommodatingly set out for them on the hand-worked bedspread. And

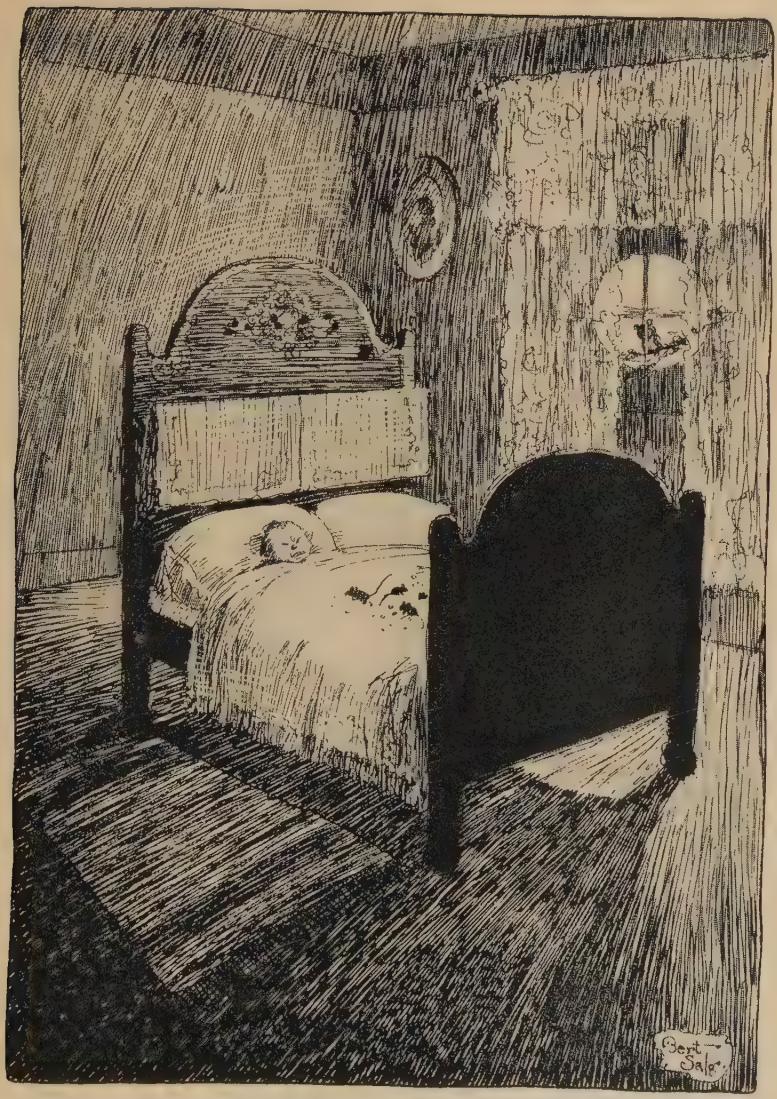
how lovely if one of the cheese-hounds snuggled under the covers where the bare legs were. That would make Mr. Dwarf wake up in a hurry.

Ten—twenty—thirty minutes passed. And we began to find out now that keyhole peeping was blamed tiresome stuff. Taking turns we kept a constant secret eye on the sleeper. But much less than jumping out of bed to chase mice around the room he never moved a hair so far as we could see. It was a queer case. And I began to wonder if he wasn't better informed on our schemes than we suspected.

To stretch my cramped legs I tiptoed to the bathroom, giving Poppy the whispered excuse that I was thirsty. And when I came back he in turn cheerfully shoved the tiresome peep-hole job at me, meandering off on a jaunt of his own, supposedly to see how Mrs. Warmley was.

Out of the lower hall came the droning voice of a clock. I counted ten metallic strokes. Then a deep silence settled over the big house. It kind of got on my nerves. And I found myself wishing, in growing uneasiness, that Poppy would hurry back.

Through an open hall window came the plaintive cry of a night owl. Somehow it made me



ONE OLD LUNKER OF A MOUSE WITH A PIECE OF CHEESE, STARTED FOR THE HEAD OF THE BED.

think of glittering cemetery shafts and crouching black-fingered pine trees. *Good*-night! I was shivering now. And I had goose pimples on me as big as cranberries.

The rising wind moaned in the trees—not the black-fingered pine trees of my crazy imagination but the equally spooky trees in Mrs. Warmley's yard. The lace curtain at the window began to flutter. There was a distant rumble, too, and occasional strengthening flashes of lightning.

Gosh! It was plenty spooky enough around here, I thought, without a storm coming up. I looked anxiously down the hall. But Poppy hadn't come into sight. Then, going back to my keyhole job, determined not to be a calf, I made the exciting discovery that the mice were merrily gathering around the festive board, as the saying is.

Watching the feast, with my forehead pressed against the doorknob, I saw one old lunker of a mouse swoop down on a piece of cheese and start off with it toward the head of the bed. If only the cheese-carrier would ram into the dwarf's nose, I thought, or, even better, pick off the clever little stunt of hiding in the sleeper's ear.

Then along came a second mouse, helter-

skelter, then a third and a fourth. What the dickens? . . . They seemed to be running from something.

The wind was blowing harder now. I could hear it whistling through the windows in the dwarf's room. Once I thought I heard something else, too—a sort of dull, grating squeak. But it wasn't the bed springs. For the dwarf hadn't moved.

Then, as I further stooped at the bolted door, my right eye glued to the keyhole—and this is the part of my story that will give you the shivers —something *white* and *vapory* glided between me and the bed, like an eclipse, after which, to my added horror, I felt the doorknob turning slowly against my forehead.

Well, that was enough for me. As a rule I don't believe in ghosts. But somehow I knew that I had seen a real ghost this time. And my whole thought was to get safely away.

"Poppy!" I screeched, scooting down the hall. *"Poppy!"*

Then who should I upset at the door of his room but the freckle specialist, himself.

"My word!" says he crossly, gingerly picking himself up. "How inconsiderate." He had a

small leather case such as doctors carry. And I remembered then that it was in this case that he kept his secret chemicals, several vials of which had been dropped on the floor.

Instead of thanking me for helping him pick up his scattered stuff, he hurried off down the stairs. And as I watched him teeter out of sight my crazy fears were lost in curiosity to know what was going on in the laboratory.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE LABORATORY

Poppy bounded up the stairs.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" says he excitedly. "The Professor just told me that you were up here screeching your head off."

"You're a peach," I lit into him. "Why didn't you stick around and help me? I might have been killed."

He admitted then that he had been down in the laboratory watching the preparation of Red's freckle cure.

"But I wasn't gone more than a minute or two," he tried to smooth things over.

"I'd hate to hold my breath for a minute or two," says I grumpily, "if you were keeping time on me."

"But what happened?" he curiously searched my face, wondering, of course, why I wasn't at the keyhole where he had left me. "Did the dwarf start throwing butcher knives at you?"

"Poppy," I shivered, peering fearfully up and

down the somber hall, "there's ghosts in this house."

My narrow escape, though, as I dished it out to him, didn't excite him half as much as I had anticipated.

"And you really think," says he, studying my face, "that the mice saw something in the room?"

"Absolutely," I waggled. "And I know what that something was, too—a ghost, and nothing else but. It was standing at the foot of the bed as they saw it, just out of my sight. Then it floated in front of the keyhole, as I say."

"Floated?" he continued his curious look.

"Yes, *floated,"* says I, a little bit out of patience with him for taking it so cool. If *he* had seen a ghost I would have considered it my duty as his chum to get excited over it. "Ghosts always float, don't they?" I wound up, kind of sharply.

"Well," he grinned, "if it *floated* between you and the keyhole, as you say, it surely must have been a real ghost, all right. . . . Did you see its feet?"

"What chance had I to see its feet," says I impatiently, "when it was right in front of the keyhole?"

"But if you didn't see its feet," his eyes snapped good-naturedly, "how do you know it wasn't walking? . . . Did you see its face?"

"Of course not," I stiffened. "For its face was as high above the keyhole as its feet were below."

"Well," he persisted, sort of keeping his grin in check, "did you see its hands?"

I had to admit that I hadn't seen any hands, either.

"But I *know* it had hands," I told him quickly, "for it turned the doorknob."

"But why should it turn the doorknob?" he puzzled.

"It knew I was there, I guess."

"I'm sorry," says he, after a moment, "that the door was bolted."

I stared at him, wondering if he was crazy.

"*Good*-night!" I squeaked, with the icicles skidding up and down my backbone. "That was the only thing that saved my life."

"Don't be simple, Jerry," he came out flat-footed. "What you saw wasn't a ghost at all. It was either the dwarf or his confederate, as you would have discovered quickly enough if he had succeeded in opening the door."

As I say, I have a lot of confidence in Poppy's theories and pet notions. For he's a smart kid. But just now I felt kind of cross toward him. He was acting too blamed smart, I thought. Certainly I ought to know more about what I had seen through the keyhole than him. It was a ghost. I was dead sure of that. And I wasn't going to let him talk me down, either. What if he was smart? Even college professors make mistakes, as the rubber tips on their lead pencils prove.

"Poppy," I decided to dish it out to him straight from the shoulder, "for once in your life you're absolutely and hopelessly wrong. In the first place it couldn't have been the dwarf, for he never moved from the bed. I'd swear to that on a stack of Bibles a mile high. And in the second place, even if the confederate had used a ladder, he couldn't have gotten into the room without me hearing him."

The leader's determination to go back to the haunted room filled me with justified shivers. But finally I got up enough courage to accompany him. And what do you know if my "ghost" didn't turn out to be a lace curtain! There it lay on the floor just within the door. Poppy

didn't say anything as he picked it up. For he knew how cheap I felt after all my big talk. But I could tell from the look on his face what was going on inside of him.

He further thought, of course, that I had let my imagination get away with me on the doorknob business. In other words, to his notion, I had just *imagined* that the doorknob turned. Well, maybe he was right, I conceded kind of foggy-like. Certainly, after the lace-curtain mess, I wasn't going to argue with him. But somehow, in a vague way, I knew that the doorknob *had* turned against my forehead. And I suddenly remembered, too, that I had heard a queer grating sound in the room just before the mice began to scamper in sudden fear.

To save the other curtains from being blown down we closed the windows. Nor were we a moment too soon. For the storm, driven along by the increasing thunder and lightning, to the complete blotting-out of the moon, was now directly over our heads. We could hear the whipped trees slapping each other with their drenched limbs as they tossed about. Once a broken branch, torn loose by the furious wind, was thrown against the side of the house, scaring the wits out of us. Then, as quickly as it came, the

downpour stopped. And feeling that there was no further danger from the storm we again raised the windows, for ventilation, after which we hurried from the room content to leave the strange dwarf to himself for the balance of the night.

On our way to the stairs the leader picked up still another vial near the scene of my recent collision with the scientist. It was peculiarly labeled "Freckle Dust." Under the circumstances I felt that it was no more than right for us to take it down to the laboratory, so we switched off the house lights and locked ourselves out of the kitchen door, the leader pocketing the key.

The moon's face was again in sight, seemingly shinier than ever after the passing summer storm. We could see millions of twinkling stars, too. And the trees that only a few minutes ago had tried to pull themselves up by the roots, to run in fear before the lash of the wind, drooped their heads stupidly, as though completely worn out. Keeping close to Poppy as we hurried down the conservatory path, now full of puddles, I crammed my lungs with the fresh night air. Boy, did it ever smell clean and sweet? I couldn't get enough of it.

We found Red stretched out in lazy comfort

on an operating table, consisting of a wide plank placed across the back of two kitchen chairs.

"Good-by freckles," says he, acting big.

"Let's hope," says I cheerfully, "that you don't lose your skin, too."

"We know our business, kid," he made another big gesture.

"Who's going to spread the mud?" says I.

"The Professor, of course."

"Boy, I wish I had the job."

"Keep away from me," he scowled distrustfully.

"I'd sock it on," I made the motion.

"Yah," says he, "and about that time I'd raise up and sock you in the jaw, too."

"Maybe you'd like some of this," says Poppy, shoving the vial of "Freckle Dust" into sight.

"What is it?" the freckled one stretched his neck. "Ground cinnamon?"

The scientist got his eyes on the familiar vial.

"My word!" says he excitedly. "Where did you get that?"

"We found it upstairs on the hall floor," I explained, trusting to him to remember about the collision.

"Can I put some of it on Red?" inquired

Poppy, pretending that he was going to pull the cork.

"No, no!" cried the scientist, quickly recovering the vial with fidgety hands.

To judge from his excited actions the "Freckle Dust" was something that needed to be handled with a great deal of precaution. We watched him nervously move the vial from one pocket to another, as though he couldn't quite make up his mind where it would be the safest. Nor would he tell us what it was when we questioned him. I got the notion, though, that it was something that caused freckles, instead of curing them. And I found out afterwards that I was right.

The yellow mud, which nearly filled Mrs. Warmley's borrowed chopping bowl, had been thinned down, in preliminary work, to a soup-like paste. And from the smell that it gave out as the skilled worker now stirred it with a butter paddle we knew that he had doctored it up with some of his special dope. He probably knew what he was doing. If he didn't, I thought, looking curiously at Red, there was liable to be a tragedy in the Meyers family.

His arm sort of petering out, the Professor set Poppy to work stirring the mud, which kept

getting thicker and thicker, like cornmeal mush. And every few minutes the old man would teeter to the bowl with one of his secret vials. The mud, in its thicker state, had a pleasing smell. Kind of like perfume. I began to have more confidence in it.

Hilarious in the thought of his coming transformation, Red broke into poetry:

"There was a Prof. in our town
And he was not a dud,
He mixed up clods of yellow clay
And called it Miracle Mud."

Poppy then showed what he could do:

"There was a boy in our town
As freckled as a carp,
He took one shot of Miracle Mud—
And now he thrums a harp."

Then it was my turn:

"Though freckled as a turkey egg,
Red Meyers became a beaut;
They put him in the movies—
For William Hart to shoot."

"No," laughed Poppy, "you've got it wrong:

"They put him in the side-show
Where Fat Emma showed her charms
One day he tried to hug her,
Dislocating both his arms.

"So then they put him in the zoo
To wash the elephant's trunk.
Somebody yelled: '*Quick*—lock the cage!'
They thought he was a monk."

"Haw! haw! haw!" guffawed Red, too happy to be offended by any such bunk as that. "You guys are funny."

Poppy was then reminded to ask the Professor in what part of the Weir marsh he had located the "cow" tree. And when we learned, from the old man's story, that the "cow" tree wasn't an oak at all, but a haw tree, I thought the unsuccessful junior mud hunter would swell up and bust.

"*Good*-night!" he tore his hair, glaring at the elderly offender. "All that work for nothing."

It was the scientist's story that while he sat under the haw tree studying his notebook the owner of the stone house came out to the roadside to bury a dead cat. And noticing that the lifted soil was peculiarly yellow, the freckle spe-

cialist, in quick examination of the haw tree from all sides, had made the exciting discovery that it unmistakably was the very tree of which he was in search. Hurrying homeward with his loaded mud pail he unwisely cut through the fields to save time, coming at dusk to the edge of a big bog just south of the cement mill. And here he had been mired for almost three hours.

"I kind of had a hunch," says Poppy, in the conclusion of the story, "that the tree stood alone."

"Quit talking about it," suffered Red. "The thought of it makes me sick."

A slight sound from without drew me to the door, where a note fell at my feet, wrapped around a small stone.

"Watch your goldfish," the mysterious note warned.

Having put Red to work at the mixing bowl, the leader lit out for the big fountain, calling to me to follow him. But so far as we could see everything was safe at the goldfish pool. What then was the meaning of the strange note? And, to even greater mystery, who had thrown it to us out of the bushes? Certainly not the daggery-eyed Chinaman.

"Where's Red?" Poppy quickly inquired of the grumbling worker, upon our return to the conservatory.

As though to answer for himself, our missing chum let out a wild squawk somewhere east of the house. It sounded for all the world as though he was being strangled—and at the moment I thought crazily of the laundryman's macaw. Tearing to the rescue, Poppy and I met the squawker coming back on the run.

And *mad!* Say, I never saw a more furious kid in all my life. Nor could I blame him. For Rainbow and the Zulutown gang, of which an old enemy of ours is the ringleader, had taken him down in the bushes, soft-soaping him with E-Z-R-Rub to a fare-you-well. He sure was a sight. His hair was plastered an inch thick; his ears were full; the laundry soap stuck out in gobs all over his face; he even had more gobs of it down his neck.

The enemy had pulled a slick trick on us, all right. Getting Poppy and I out of the way, they had tossed another note to Red, reading: "Your chums need you." And when the freckled one lit out to help us, like the good pal that he is, they nabbed him.

In a way, Poppy and I were relieved to learn that it was Rainbow who had been hanging around the conservatory and not the Chinaman. But though the enemy's trick made us fighting mad, as you can imagine, our good sense told us to stay inside. For outnumbered as we were two to one, according to Red's story, what would please the others any better than to give Poppy and I a similar soapy dose? No, thank you! It was better to be safe than sorry.

Told by the impatient specialist that the Miracle Mud was now ready, we helped Red back on the operating table, giving his face a final swipe with the towel.

"Remember," says he tragically, sort of rolling his eyes heavenward, "if I do land that harp-thrumming job, it's death to the enemy."

"We won't promise to commit murder," says Poppy grimly. "But Rainbow will get his, nevertheless—don't you worry about that."

CHAPTER XV

POOR RED!

PROFESSOR PIP had experimented with all kinds of mud in his search for a "natural foundation" for his freckle cure. It was the story of his career, in part, that he had tried out green mud from Siberia, blue mud from China, brown mud from Calcutta, and black gumbo from Missouri. But in each case something had been lacking. Once he had taken the skin off a boy's nose in experimenting with purple mud from Australia. Red, of course, was tremendously pleased to hear that. Oh, yes! I thought I'd die. But he didn't back out. For the excited specialist was dead sure this trip that everything was going to be lovely. And, as I say, old red-head was crazy to blossom out with a brand new physiognomy, as the science teacher calls it.

Having draped his baggy black coat over the handle of an old lawn mower, the talkative specialist further got himself ready for the important operation, or whatever you want to call

it, by rolling up his shirt sleeves to the elbows.

"Our present preparations peculiarly remind me of a most singular experiment that I conducted in Cairo," says he, in further free talk of his earlier work. "The subject on this particular occasion was an Egyptian lady, sadly afflicted with Lentigo, but the possessor otherwise of a charming personality. As I recall we used for the experiment a special alluvium compound from eastern Jamaica. The dear lady, of whose sincerity and honesty I had not the slightest doubt, was most graciously patient throughout the prolix corrective procedure. But when the mud cast was finally removed from her face, imagine my unbounded horror to discover that she had completely lost her nose."

This was too much for Red.

"Sweet Paris green," his eyes bulged. "I guess I'll quit."

"Later the lady's rather uncouth husband threatened verbosely to bring suit against me," the scientist continued his crazy story, sort of exercising his long operating fingers in preliminary work like a professional piano player. "As can be imagined I was deeply distressed over the deplorable mishap. How *could* the lady lose her nose, I asked myself, over and over again.

Strange; very strange. I finally consulted a reputable physician. And consider my great joy to learn, through his familiarity with the case, that I was the victim of a base plot, the object of which was to extort money from me. The lady's nose, I was told, was plaster of Paris."

"What a relief," says Red, sighing like a healthy furnace.

The operator fished up a big gob of yellow mud.

"Now," says he brightly, "please close your mouth and maintain a perfectly immobile countenance."

Up came the red head.

"Hey!" the comical freckled face was screwed out of shape. "What do you think I am?—a Ford?"

Poppy and I were laughing fit to kill.

"He didn't say *automobile* countenance," says the leader. "He said *immobile* countenance."

"Well, what's that?"

"You sure are a dumb-dora," I threw at him.

"Don't get fresh," he pushed out his mug at me. "For I can get down from here in a jiffy if I have to."

"You couldn't catch me if you did get down," I grinned.

Poppy saw how impatient the operator was to begin his work.

"Lay still," he told the freckled patient. "You're holding up the wheels of science."

"Yes," put in the fidgeting specialist, "let us forego all further facetious banter and get down to business. . . . Are you ready?"

"How long will it take?"

"Not more than three hours, I trust."

"Three hours!" Red whooped. "Good-night nurse. Let me go to the house and get some nourishment."

"The house is locked," Poppy quickly headed the gabby one off in that direction.

"Three hours!" the patient further suffered in advance. "What if I have to sneeze?"

"You mustn't sneeze," he was told quickly. "In fact, if the experiment is to be a complete success you must refrain from even the slightest movement of the facial muscles."

"Meaning which?"

"That you aren't even to grin," Poppy explained.

"But suppose I want to talk?"

"You talk too much," I told him.

Up came his head again.

"Oh," says he, with a hard look, "is that so?"

"Lie down," laughed Poppy, "before we knock you down."

"Are you ready?" the Professor was fast losing patience.

"Just a minute—I want to spit. . . . Say, Poppy, what have you got in the house good to eat?"

"A big mouse pie," joked the leader.

"Any jam?"

"I suppose so."

"I love jam. . . . What time is it?"

"Half past eleven."

"To half past twelve to half past one to half past two," he counted off the hours of his coming ordeal. "Then we'll have a late supper of bread and jam, huh?" says he hopefully.

"Sock him in the mouth with a handful of mud," I told the Professor.

"Well, fellows," he grinned, stretching out, "so long till two-thirty."

"Make it six-thirty," says Poppy. "For Jerry and I are going to hit the hay as soon as the Professor gets you daubed up."

"Why don't you begin?" the patient scowled at the nervous old man. "What's your idea in keeping me waiting?"

"My word!" says the bewildered employer.

Then, collecting himself, he went grimly to work.

This was all new stuff to Poppy and I, so we watched closely while the specialist skilfully covered the freckled face with a layer of yellow mud, working first on one side of the operating table and then teetering to the other side. We could see plainly enough that he knew his business.

Having massaged the mud into the pores of the skin he then held the yellow coating in place with bandages wrapped around and around the head. All I could think of was a mummy. Still, who could imagine a mummy with red hair!

It was the scientist's further plan to wait patiently beside the operating table until the required three hours were up. But that was too slow for Poppy and I. So we gave Red's hand a final squeeze and lit out for bed. In view of what happened later on I always was glad that I went back to tell the patient that we were going to have pancakes for breakfast. A big joy came into his eyes as they peeped through twin holes in the bandages. He gave my hand an extra squeeze, too. Somehow just then he seemed very near and dear to me. Good old Red! What if he did get the apple pie ahead of me? That wasn't anything to hold against him. Later in the evening

he had heroically redeemed himself. As I thought of how he had started out alone to help us, with no fear for himself, I was glad that he had been given this swell chance of getting fixed up the way he wanted to be. He deserved it. It was his reward, sort of.

The big house was fearfully quiet. And as I kept pace with the leader down the hall and up the wide stairs I found myself searching the shadows, unable to shake off the nervous feeling that ghostly eyes were secretly watching us. For the doorknob *had* turned against my forehead. The more I thought about it the more convinced I was that my imagination hadn't tricked me. And somehow I had the feeling that what had happened at the door of the dwarf's room was a sort of warning to me to watch my p's and q's.

Poppy found Mrs. Warmley awake, as he told me upon his return to our room, where, as you can imagine, I had taken particular pains to see that nothing was hiding in the closet or under the bed.

"What do you suppose she told me, Jerry?" says he, with a queer look on his face.

"I'm prepared for the worst," says I, sliding out of my shoes. "So dish it out."

"She declares that some one kissed her."

I stared at him.

"When?" says I. "To-night?"

"Sure thing," he nodded, kicking off his own shoes. "According to her story she was lying in a sort of doze, half asleep and half awake. Some one tiptoed into the darkened room, bending over the bed, and then she felt a warm kiss on her cheek. I made her think it was me, so don't tell her any different."

"Sick people," says I, "frequently imagine things like that."

"True enough," he agreed, peculiarly thoughtful. "But would she have thought of counting the strokes of the clock if she had been out of her head?"

"When did it happen?" says I curiously.

"At ten o'clock."

I further stared at him, remembering what had happened to me shortly after that hour.

"Poppy," says I, "do you suppose it was Professor Pip. He was in the house about that time."

"I know it," the other nodded. "But unless he's an old fool why should he slip into her room and kiss her? . . . I'd sooner think it was the dwarf."

WE COULD SEE PLAINLY THAT HE KNEW HIS BUSINESS.

Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish. *Page* 180

"But it couldn't have been the dwarf," says I quickly. "For at ten o'clock I was watching him through the keyhole."

The leader gave an uneasy laugh.

"Maybe it was your 'ghost,' " says he queerly.

"Look here, Poppy," I put my wits to work. "You and Red were in the conservatory. I was at the keyhole watching the dwarf. Moreover, the 'ghost' that you mention was in the room with the dwarf. The only one we can't account for is the Professor. . . . How are you going to get around that?"

"I can't," he shrugged, with a baffled expression.

"We ought to give the old gilly a swift kick in the seat of the pants," says I, sort of hot-like, realizing that it wasn't proper for a man to go around kissing old ladies in bed, however deeply he had fallen in love with them.

"That's what he deserves, all right," nodded Poppy, "if he's a masher."

"He looks as innocent as pie," says I, with a picture of the queer old man in my mind. "But they say that still water runs deep."

Getting into the strange bed we kind of snuggled up close to each other, feeling safer that way. And now that the lights were out in our room,

and everything was still, I found myself listening for possible ghostly footfalls.

"Poppy," I whispered, stirring uneasily, "did you lock the door?"

"Sure thing," he laughed. "I balanced a chair in front of it, too. So if you hear the chair fall in the middle of the night, jump for your life."

"Where'll I jump?" says I. "Out of the window?"

"We'll jump together," says he in nonsense. "And ever afterwards the window will be called 'Lovers' Leap.' Isn't that poetic?" he ended sweetly.

"Cuckoo!"

"I wonder how Red is," the other laughed.

"Probably purring to himself like an old pussycat," says I. "For I told him that we were going to have some Aunt Jemimas for breakfast."

"Isn't he the craziest kid!"

"He sure is a monkey, all right."

"I like him, though," came earnestly.

"You and me, both," says I.

"It's going to be an awful disappointment to him if the freckle cure doesn't take."

"Or if he loses his nose, huh?" I laughed.

"Do you believe that story, Jerry?"

"Sure thing. Don't you?"

"Somehow I have the queer feeling at times that the Professor is putting on. So it may be that you hit the mark a whole lot closer than you realized in comparing him to still water."

"Don't talk that way," says I, thinking of Red. "You make me uneasy."

Just before we dropped off to sleep the owl that I had heard earlier in the evening, or one like it, lit in a tree outside of our window, dishing out the usual mournful line of "Whoo-o-o! Whoo-o-o!" stuff. And again a picture of glazed marble cemetery eyes and crouching pine trees paraded through my crazy imagination. Then, as the silence deepened, following the owl's flight, I gave a final nod and glided off into the garden of dreams, as the poet says.

Suddenly a German Zeppelin swooped out of the sky, a sinister black monster, and began bombing the house. Bing! *Bang!* BOOM! The dwarf was a spy, and they were trying to kill him. Of course, this was all a crazy dream. There was no Zeppelin there. But for a minute or two, as I sat up in bed digging the sleep out of my eyes, I couldn't quite make myself believe that I hadn't actually heard the sound of bombs.

"Get up quick," cried Poppy, jumping into his pants. "It's Red Meyers. He's downstairs pounding on the back door."

I could hear our chum's terrified voice yelling to us to let him in. Something was trying to get him. There was no doubt about that. And if you think I wasn't scared, as I hitched up this surprise with my earlier shivery experience, I wish you could have been there to hold your hand over my heart.

We tumbled down the stairs, keeping close together, buttoning our clothes on the run. The hall clock struck three. I remember it vaguely. Then, switching on the kitchen lights, we quickly turned the key in the back door, catching Red in our arms as he fell exhausted into the room.

He still had the mummy bandages on his face. And his eyes as we saw them through the peep holes were the scaredest-looking eyes I ever saw in all my life.

It was his story that he had dropped asleep on the operating table, with the Professor nodding beside him. Suddenly he had heard a scream. And jerked wide awake in an instant he had found that the scientist was gone.

Then, in getting down from the operating table,

scared out of his wits, he had caught sight of the daggery-eyed Chinaman watching him through the conservatory's glass walls. Clawing at the bandages for air, he had lit out, screaming, for the house, expecting every minute that the Chinaman would grab him at the back door and drag him evilly into the bushes.

We got him upstairs, figuring that the best place for him was in bed. Then, running downstairs again, we got a club apiece and started for the lighted conservatory, feeling that it was our duty, as detectives, to investigate the scientist's amazing disappearance.

In our quick search of the empty building we discovered that the bowl of yellow mud was missing, too, which sort of proved Poppy's theory that the unknown enemy had been waiting for this moment to secretly grab the perfected freckle cure. But, even so, where was the Professor? Had they abducted him, too? There was no trace of him in or near the conservatory.

To further mystery we found that his room had been ransacked. The dresser drawers were pulled out; one drawer was turned completely upside down; clothing and other stuff was scattered every which way. We never dreamed,

though, that the old man, himself, had been in the room while we were asleep until we picked up a telltale empty vial.

It looked to us now as though the scientist had willfully run away. For his grip was gone. We stared at the empty vial. "Freckle Dust!" Could it be, we thought, in growing anxiety, that he had vacantly stirred the "Freckle Dust" into the mud while the leader and I were following up the "goldfish" note? And on discovery of his blunder had he cleared out to avoid the consequences? If so, how about poor Red?

Still, it was Red's story that he had seen the frightful yellow face pressed against the conservatory wall. That, and the scream, would suggest an attack. Moreover, if the blundering scientist had run away, would he have had the presence of mind to take the mud bowl with him?

You can see what a crazy tangle it was.

Having tried without success to loosen his bandages Red yipped to us to come and help him.

"Well," he inquired eagerly, when we had completely uncovered his face, hoping for the best, "how do I look?"

"Why—why you look like yourself," Poppy finally got his voice.

"But do you see any freckles?" the uncovered one persisted.

"No," says Poppy, and the single word sounded kind of hollow. "I don't see any *freckles*. Do you, Jerry?" he gave me a sly kick.

"No," says I, "I don't see any *freckles*."

And I told the truth, too. He hadn't any *freckles*. His whole face was *one solid freckle*. I never saw such a looking face in all my life. The poor kid! And together he and I had hoped for such big things. I felt sick to my stomach.

It was plain to us now, notwithstanding the scream and other puzzling occurences, that the blundering scientist had indeed skinned out, like the coward that he was. His "nose" story might be bunk, as Poppy suspected. But here was a case where fat damages could be collected against him. He knew it. And he was trying to save his pocketbook, as you might say, at poor Red's expense.

"Poppy," says I grimly, as we held guarded counsel in the hall, "we've got to find that old geezer and make him pay up."

"You bet your boots," the other waggled.

"Poor Red!" says I.

"Who's going to break the news to him?" says the other, sharing my misery.

"Let's take him home," says I, kind of cowardly-like, "and rap on the door and leave him."

"Hey!" the object of our misery yipped from the bed. "I thought you guys were going to bring me a mirror."

I should have mentioned that our small room had a high chest of drawers in the place of a dresser, but no mirror.

"Go in and tell him a fairy story," says Poppy, with haunted eyes. "Maybe he'll go to sleep."

CHAPTER XVI

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

RED was perfectly innocent of his awful condition. Nor were his suspicions aroused when I told him, like a low-down lying horse thief, that all of Mrs. Warmley's mirrors were chained to the walls.

Then, to keep him in bed, I told him about the time I filled my porous bicycle tires with thick molasses, which is the funniest real story that I know.

"Haw! haw! haw!" he bellowed, when I came to the point where the metal puncture plug came out of the front tire while I was coasting down hill, thus turning the tire into a sort of molasses pin wheel. "I bet you felt 'stuck up,' huh?"

"I was squirted with New Orleans molasses from head to foot," I went on, making it as bad as I could for his added entertainment. "I had molasses in my eyes and ears and hair and nose and mouth and down my neck and up my sleeves and—"

"Haw! haw! haw!" he boomed again, cutting me off. "It gets better every time you tell it." Then to my surprise he asked me, kind of sheepish-like, if I knew the youngest Smiley girl.

"The one with the pug nose?" says I, giving him a puzzled look.

"Say that in front of her brother," says he kind of stiff-like, "and see what you get."

I stared at him with a sort of sinking sensation.

"What's got into you?" I finally found my voice.

"Well," says he, fidgeting in the bed, "I'm fourteen. And now that I've got a new face, and we both like to go to picture shows, I thought maybe I—I— That is— Oh, confound it," he glared, "quit looking at me that way. I guess it's all right for a fellow to make a date with a nice girl without you staring your eyes out. Anyway, her nose is a whole lot better looking than your old nose."

At any other time his sudden interest in girls would have amazed me. But now I was sickened through and through. The poor kid! He had about as much chance of getting a date with a girl as I had of receiving a birthday card from Adam and Eve.

"Red," says I, leaning tenderly over the bed,

"please don't talk about the girls. It hurts me."

"What's the matter with you?" says he, squinting at me curiously. "Are you jealous?"

"Well," I decided not to deny it, "you and I have been pretty good pals. I don't want to lose you."

"Don't worry," he made a big gesture, which under any other circumstances would have nettled me, "you aren't going to lose me. But you mustn't be selfish. . . . Did you ever notice what pretty black hair she has, Jerry?" he rolled his eyes in ecstasy, or whatever you call it. "Just like long strings of licorice."

"Please, Red," I suffered.

"Oh, don't act so silly."

"Let me finish my story about the molasses tire," I begged desperately.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" his suspicions were aroused.

"Red," says I, fumbling around for the proper words to express my sympathy, "if I—I got my legs cut off in a lawn mower, and had to walk on crutches, you wouldn't go back on me, would you?"

"*You* get your legs cut off in a lawn mower!" he hooted. "That's funny."

"I mean in a mowing machine," I corrected.

"You don't know a mowing machine from a sauer-kraut sheller," says he.

"Anyway," says I, "just imagine that I had my legs cut off. You'd stand by me, wouldn't you?"

"Say, Jerry," he further bored holes into me with his eyes, "are you crazy?"

"I give up," I told him in despair.

"Are your legs going back on you?" he then quizzed.

"Of course not," I kind of lost patience with him.

"Then what's your idea of talking about crutches?"

"I wanted you to say that you'd stand by me, even if I lost my legs, and then I was going to tell you that I'd do the same by you."

"Boy," he waggled, "this is getting deep."

"Please don't forget about it, Red," I begged.

"Forget about what?" he further quizzed me with his eyes.

"That I'm your true-blue pal through thick and thin. No matter what happens to you, kid, you can always depend on me."

"Am I to believe that?" says he brightly.

"Absolutely," I bit off the word, like a benediction.

"Then," he beamed, "I'll let you carry the note."

"What note?"

"My note to Mildred Smiley, asking for a date."

Well, it was useless to say more. I saw that. I hoped, though, that when the truth of his condition was known to him he wouldn't forget my promise of enduring friendship.

And to think, I further suffered, turning away from him to rest my eyes, that he would have to go through life looking like this. It was terrible. I never realized before how much a boy with a decent-looking face had to be thankful for. To that point, freckles weren't anything to be ashamed of. I could see now that he should have sensibly let his freckles alone. His feeling toward them was silly. But it seems we never realize such things until the horse has been stolen, as the saying is.

There was no further sleep for Poppy or I that night. We let Red have the whole bed to himself, sort of fooling around in the room, in natural talk, until he dropped off. Then, as the daylight came, we went outside and guardedly searched the grounds for possible clews bearing

on the old scientist's sudden flight. But all we found of a mysterious nature was a small pile of dirt near the conservatory showing where some one had been digging in the ground.

Making sure that Red and Mrs. Warmley were both sound asleep, and hence not likely to need us for an hour or so, we quietly locked ourselves out of the house and headed for the depot where we inquired of the sleepy night operator if an old man answering to the Professor's description had boarded any of the earlier trains. Getting a negative reply we then made the rounds of the all-night garages, thinking that the fleeing scientist, unable to get a train, might have hired a car. But no one with whom we talked could supply any helpful information.

Had the scientist hoofed it out of town? Or was he in hiding? In either case we felt confident of his early capture. For the law would quickly spot him if he was headed for other parts. And in case he was still in town, or near town, we, as detectives, or Bill Hadley, would do the spotting act.

Nor were we merely concerned in landing the old man in jail to answer to the law for his inexcusable disfigurement of our luckless chum.

The thought had come to us that possibly the scientist would be able to use his skill in correcting the blunder. Even to have the big blotch bleached out a shade or two would help some. And it wasn't impossible that in further supervised experiments he would be able to completely remove the disfigurement. Such at least was our hope.

As for the yellow-faced spy, it was our conclusion now that the Chinaman had stolen the mud bowl while the scientist was ransacking his room in intended flight. And the scream could be explained by the unexpected meeting of the two men in the conservatory door. But how sad indeed would be the enemy's later disappointment, we thought grimly, to learn that the stolen "cure" was in reality a young freckle epidemic.

Letting ourselves quietly into the house we lit the kitchen stove and started breakfast, determined that poor Red at least should have plenty to eat. I even skinned over to the grocery store to buy some milk for his cocoa. Hurrying home, what was my amazement to find Poppy gabbing on the front porch with the snobbish beauty-parlor owner.

Can you imagine it!—she had come here before

breakfast to apologize. Oh, she was plenty stiff about it, and, to that point, we learned later on that she has a secret motive in wanting to smooth things over. But it was a big come-down for her, nevertheless.

She had been entirely wrong about the theft of the handbag, she admitted. For upon her return home she had found the bag in her room.

"I'm so used to carrying it," she concluded, "that I must have imagined that I had it with me. I'm very sorry. I hope that Mrs. Warmley will forgive me."

Poppy and I stared at each other in multiplied bewilderment when the visitor had gone. For both of us had *seen* the beaded bag, not only in her hands but on the center table. Either she was lying, to a hidden purpose, or the thief had strangely returned the bag. In either case, as you probably will agree, it was a puzzling situation.

But of this one thing we were dead sure: The dwarf, in escaping from the music room through the front door, never had returned the handbag himself. Either he had slipped it to the other Chinaman outside of the house, or the confederate actually had visited the pretended sleeper in his room.

Having baked a pile of pancakes a foot high we

were about to yip to Red to hurry down to breakfast when Mrs. Warmley surprised us by coming down the stairs fully dressed. She was feeling much better, she said. And our report of the beauty-parlor owner's early-morning call further brightened the wrinkled face.

Realizing that she would be shocked by Red's disfigurement, and wanting in other ways to keep her uninformed on the night's developments, we decided to carry the smaller one's breakfast up to him on a tray. It was a useless trip, however. For having awakened while we were at the depot he had lit out for home, leaving a note pinned to his pillow:

"Don't eat up all the pancakes. For I'll be right back. I'm going home to surprise Mother. She'll be so glad when she sees me. I'll get some maple syrup, too."

"Well," says Poppy, shrugging, "that's that." And going back quietly to our own breakfast, glad in a way that we had been saved the unpleasant job of breaking the sad news to the disfigured one, we later helped Mrs. Warmley clear the table and wash the accumulated dirty dishes. For we knew, all right, that our chum wouldn't be back with the promised bottle of maple syrup. His mother would see to that.

CHAPTER XVII

AN AMAZING DISCOVERY

DAD called up on the telephone while I was helping with the dishes.

"What happened to Red Meyers?" says he curiously. "They just sent for your mother to come over there in a hurry, telling her that Mrs. Meyers was having hysterics. And I can see Doc Leland's flivver parked in front of the house."

"Red is out of luck," says I soberly.

"Is he sick?"

"He took a freckle treatment last night," says I, "and it worked backwards."

"Well," says Dad, when he had heard the complete story of the bungled operation, "I certainly feel sorry for the Meyers family, and more particularly for poor Red, himself. Yet I'm glad, Jerry, that it wasn't you."

"You aren't half as glad as I am," I kind of shuddered, as a picture of Red's face rose before me.

Having put an end to the dish-washing job

Poppy ran upstairs to see how the dwarf was. And upon his return to the kitchen I heard Mrs. Warmley telling him, in answer to a question, that she hadn't had a fig in the house for months. Motioning to me to follow him he then lit out for Onstad's grocery store, where he tried to buy a pound of figs like a sample that he carried in his coat pocket.

"I'm sorry," says the merchant, recognizing the sample, "but we're all out of Chinese figs just now. The thief who paid us a visit the other night stole all we had."

"Poppy," says I excitedly, when we were in the street, "where did you get that fig?"

"Can't you guess, Jerry?" he grinned.

"In the dwarf's room?"

"Sure thing. I found it on the floor beside the bed."

We knew from our earlier search of the dwarf's room that no food was hidden there. So we could not doubt that the pretended sleeper either had been out of his room some time during the night, or that the stolen fig had been brought to him, probably as a part of his usual midnight supper. And Mrs. Warmley had been nervously waiting for the "sleeper" to show some sign of

wakefulness so that she could give him his first meal according to the Chicago doctor's instructions!

"Poppy," says I, kind of worried-like, "I think we ought to tell Bill Hadley about this."

"Why?" says the leader quickly.

"Well, the fig proves plainly enough who the store robber is. And people like that ought to be handcuffed."

But the other had much different plans.

"As I see it, Jerry," he spoke thoughtfully, "this store-robbing business is just a sort of side issue. Hiding here, in some deep scheme, and needing food, one of the gang took a criminal's way of getting it. So, much less than going to Bill Hadley with our story as you suggest, thus scaring the gang away, our job as detectives, according to my notion, is to find out what the big scheme is. We think the Chinamen are spies, put here, one on the inside and the other on the outside, to grab the Professor's perfected freckle cure. We think the dwarf is faking. We think the pair have a secret way of getting into and out of the Hidden House. We think the dwarf stole the handbag and that the Chinaman with the skeleton key strangely returned it. We think this and

we think that. But what do we actually *know?* Mighty little. Moreover, there's your friend, Mr. Lung. What changed him so suddenly? Is he in league with the other Chinamen? It would seem so. But we lack proof." Pausing in the long speech the leader shook his head. "No, Jerry," he added convincingly, "if we're going to be real detectives we've got to work this thing out for ourselves, forgetting about Bill Hadley except as we may need him in the end to do the official handcuff stuff."

"All right, Poppy," says I, completely won over by his earnest talk. "You're the leader. Whatever you say goes."

Mr. Lung was in his drying yard. But when we looked over the board fence at him, instead of returning our polite morning greeting, he threatened to come at us with a club. Then, as the macaw laughed shrilly and began calling the turtle by name, he ran into the laundry, slamming the door behind him.

We hung around the laundry yard for several minutes, peeping over the fence. But we heard nothing more of the macaw. Nor did we get further sight of the laundryman, whose strange actions puzzled us more than ever.

Learning from a kid who lived in our block that Mr. Meyers had sworn out a warrant for the scientist's arrest we lit out for the Hidden House, where we found Bill Hadley stamping up and down the front porch.

"What have you fellers done with the old freckle geezer?" the marshal lit into us in his rough way.

"He's skinned out," says Poppy.

Getting our story the officer moved heavily to the front door.

"Hey, Meyers," he shouted in a coarse voice. "Come here."

Quick footsteps sounded in the hall.

"The boys jest told me," says Bill, when Red's dad came hurriedly through the doorway, "that the old man has skinned out."

Standing near the door Poppy heard other footsteps.

"Here comes Mrs. Warmley," he spoke quickly to the two men. "Please don't say anything in front of her that will alarm her. For she was sick last night."

"Oh! . . ." the old lady's eyes lit up at sight of us. "Here are the boys now. I dare say they can tell you where Professor Pip is. Though why he should make such a mess of his room is beyond

me. Still, I'm never surprised at anything *he* does."

Telling the old lady that the scientist might be away for several days on a special mud-hunting trip, Poppy and I then led the way to the conservatory, showing the men the operating table and picturing to them the preparation of the yellow mud and the later operation.

"But did it never occur to you boys," says Mr. Meyers, in the conclusion of our story, "that your chum might suffer from the consequences of the operation?"

"No, sir," Poppy shook his head.

"Then you believed that the freckle cure would be a success?"

"Everybody seemed to think so, most of all Red, himself."

"But if the Purfessor run away as you say," Bill put his wits to work, "who was the geezer who later chased Red to the back door?"

"Jerry and I think it was the same man who was here earlier in the evening."

The marshal remembered about the stolen handbag.

"The burglar, huh?" he knit his shaggy eyebrows.

"That's our idea," nodded Poppy.

"As Donald's chums," Mr. Meyers spoke again, "you boys should have watched every movement of the old man's to make sure that nothing injurious went into the mud. It will be hard for me to forgive you for your thoughtlessness."

"It's easy enough, Mr. Meyers," says Poppy, in our defense, "to think of those things afterwards. As a matter of fact, even if we had known that the 'Freckle Dust' had gotten into the mud by mistake, we probably wouldn't have been alarmed. For Red was freckled, anyway. We might even have laughed at the thought of him getting a few more freckles."

"Maybe," I spoke up hopefully, "the Professor will be able to cure him."

"Matters are bad enough," says Mr. Meyers bitterly, "without running the chance of making them worse."

In duplicating our search of the grounds for possible clews bearing on the old man's flight the marshal discovered the hole near the conservatory. And learning from us that the dirt had been thrown up some time during the preceding night he got down on his knees, feeling around in the bottom of the hole.

"Um. . . ." says he, uncovering a small

wooden object. "Looks like a butter paddle."

Poppy gave a cry.

"Why! . . . It's the Professor's paddle—the one he used in mixing the mud."

Here was more mystery. If the scientist had indeed tried to hide his guilt, as you might say, by burying the mixing paddlle, why hadn't he finished the job? Furthermore, why had he dug such a *big* hole?

Poppy could hardly contain himself until the others left.

"Don't you see what happened, Jerry?" he cried excitedly, when we were alone. "The Professor intended to bury both the bowl and the paddle. But when he went to get the bowl, it was gone. And in his fright he forgot to go back and cover up the paddle."

I was studying the hole.

"Poppy," says I, "it looks to me as though the bowl actually was buried on top of the paddle. For here's an imprint of the rim. See?"

"You're right, Jerry," he nodded, in closer investigation. "Evidently the old man buried both the bowl and the paddle, one on top of the other. And then the spy dug the bowl up."

This kind of upset our other theory bearing on

the bowl's theft. But, if anything, the new theory was better. Still, if the scientist hadn't actually bumped into the spy while the latter was running off with the stolen bowl, as we had earlier suspected, why had the old man screamed?

A still greater surprise awaited us at the goldfish fountain, where we found the wooden mud bowl floating upside down. Not only had the yellow mud tinged the water slightly, but the goldfish, as we saw them swimming lazily in the sunlight, had a peculiar spotted look. Suspecting the truth, Poppy excitedly dipped up one of the fish with his cap. Then, after a long look at the captive, his wondering eyes sought mine.

What had happened to Red Meyers also had peculiarly happened to the goldfish, with the difference that the "Freckle Dust" had added a hundred per cent to the value of the beautified fish.

But real freckled goldfish! And *this* coming on top of our earlier "lodge" scheme! It sure was a bewildering coincidence, all right. Little wonder that the leader and I stared at each other dizzily.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FRECKLE EPIDEMIC

By noon practically everybody in Tutter had heard about the unfortunate freckle operation and the blundering scientist's later flight. At the Meyers home the front curtains were drawn, as though to shut out prying eyes, but it was generally known throughout town that both Red and his mother were in bed, one impatiently awaiting the arrival of a special red-ray bleaching machine from Chicago, and the other with a cold towel on her head and a bottle of smelling salts in each hand.

Always on the job in cases of sickness the "sunshine" committee of the Stitch and Chatter Club, of which Mrs. Meyers was a member, came promptly to the front door with a potted geranium dressed up in green crêpe paper. It was very kind of them, Mr. Meyers said, in his nervous acceptance of the geranium. But no one except Doc Leland and Mother were permitted to pass beyond the front door.

Having checked up on the freckle specialist's earlier work in the Weir marsh Bill Hadley had hurried out of town with a posse, figuring that the vague-minded old man in his hasty flight would be very likely to go back to the familiar territory. And, to that point, I wondered myself if the runaway wasn't hiding in the marsh. If so, Bill and his men undoubtedly would earn the reward that Mr. Meyers had offered for the scientist's early arrest.

Following our amazing discovery of the freckled goldfish in the big fountain Poppy had lit out for home, telling me to keep an eye on things until he got back. My main job, of course, was to keep talkative people away from the Hidden House, thus preventing Mrs. Warmley from learning the truth about the Professor's flight. Nor did I tell her about the miracle that had happened in her goldfish fountain. For how could I explain the freckles to her without dishing out the whole story? Certainly, I wasn't going to lie.

Mr. Stair breezed up the path at ten o'clock to get the complete official story of the freckle operation for his evening newspaper. So I told him what we already had told the marshal, even pos-

ing beside the operating table while he took a picture. Moreover, I showed him the hole in the ground and the butter paddle. But I said nothing about our recovery of the mud bowl at the fountain. Like Bill Hadley it was the editor's notion that the dizzy-minded freckle specialist in running away had taken the mud bowl with him.

Shortly after the editor's visit Poppy yipped to me from the fountain, and when I got there he was dipping freckled goldfish into the big store aquarium, which was now bolted securely to a coaster wagon.

"Jerry," says he, with shining eyes, "I've got an old humdinger of a scheme."

"Don't tell me," says I, kind of weak in the knees, "that you're going to start up another goldfish business."

"Why not?" says he, with a happy grin.

"Poppy," says I impatiently, "you ought to know that we can't sell goldfish to people who already have goldfish. And if there's anybody in this town whom we missed I'd like to know who it is."

"Listen, Jerry. How many automobiles has your pa owned in the past ten years?"

"Seven or eight."

"Isn't it true that when one gets out of style, and shabby-looking, he buys another?"

"I guess so."

"And isn't it true, too," he followed up, "that the automobile dealer comes around with the shiny new car, offering to take the old one in on trade?"

"Sure thing," says I. "But what's that got to do with goldfish?"

"Freckled goldfish, Jerry," he then wound himself up for one of his occasional big speeches, "is the latest style in goldfish. More beautiful radiator lines; deeper upholstering; roomier body; full-vision windows; automatic windshield wiper; rubber-cushioned motor; oil filter; four-wheel brakes. And what woman," he wound up, "will want to fool around with an old-fashioned goldfish when she can easily trade it in and get one of the new up-to-date freckled kind?"

I could see now that he had been home studying the automobile advertisements.

"Poppy," says I, giving him a steady eye, "you're going to get yourself talked about if you keep on acting that way. For who ever heard of a goldfish with four-wheel brakes?"

It's hard, though, to stop him when he once gets started.

"We're on the road to fortune, Jerry," he beamed.

"Yah," says I, "we're on the road, all right. And the place where we're likely to head in is a big brick building between here and Ashton with iron bars on the windows."

That kind of brought him down to earth.

"What are you talking about?" he stared.

"The county cuckoo house," says I. "What are you talking about?"

"Our new goldfish scheme."

"It's very generous of you," says I, "to call it *our* scheme. But you can have the honor all to yourself."

"I don't believe yet, Jerry," he looked at me steadily, "that you know what I'm talking about."

"Do you?" says I quickly.

"Listen. Your ma has a pair of goldfish. Not the *new* kind of goldfish, with beautiful freckled tails, but the *old* kind, with plain tails. Tap! tap! tap! on the front door. That's us, you know. 'Oh, good morning, Mrs. Todd. It has been reported to us that you are in the market for a new car—I mean a new pair of goldfish. And we'd

like very much to demonstrate our latest improved model with full-floating fins, balloon gills and freckled finish. There is style in goldfish, Mrs. Todd, the same as in automobiles. And surely you will want to be as up-to-date in this respect as your neighbors. Your old goldfish, of course, will be taken in trade. So the cost of the new goldfish to you, with all of the latest improvements, will be only ten cents apiece.' "

"Poppy," says I, "if you spring that line of gab on Mother you'll get something, all right, but it won't be money."

"What do you mean?" he grinned, all wrapped up in his crazy scheme.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that he'd get a whack over the head with the family broom. But I checked myself, realizing that Mother never would do a thing like that.

"At the very least," says I, "you'll get a polite hint to pack up your stuff and evaporate."

"It's a sound business proposition," he declared. "And more than that its possibilities are limitless."

"Poppy," says I, "I actually believe you're in earnest."

"Did you ever hear of the miraculous pitcher, Jerry?"

I let out a despairing yip.

"Are we going to sell pitchers, too?"

"If you'll remember, the pitcher never ran dry. And so it is with our new scheme. We take your ma's two goldfish in trade; we put them in the big fountain; and the next morning they're freckled, all ready for some one else. It's the greatest money-making scheme I ever heard of, outside of counterfeiting. When we've traded in all of the old goldfish around here we can open up an office in Ashton. We can start a mail-order business, too."

I was laughing now. For who wouldn't have laughed at the crazy monkey. Such a scheme! He insisted, though, that it would work. So just to please him I helped fill the aquarium and then we started out.

"Mrs. Boggs," says he, at the first house where we stopped, "have you heard about our new improved freckled goldfish?"

"No," says Mrs. Boggs, kind of stiff-like, "but I heard about the poor Meyers boy. So if you're selling some kind of freckle stuff you needn't stop here."

"Our business is goldfish, Mrs. Boggs, not freckle compounds. As you probably know,

there's a great difference in goldfish. Some are plain, with ordinary scrimpy tails, and some are freckled, with gorgeous fantails. We would like very much to demonstrate one of our latest improved models and quote an attractive trade-in price for your consideration."

"Models?" she repeated the word, looking at Poppy as though she thought he was cuckoo.

"I should have said styles. . . . How many goldfish have you, Mrs. Boggs?"

"You ought to know," says she, "for you sold them to me last week."

"I believe it was two," came the guess.

"Yes," says she, "it was two."

Getting the leader's signal I dished out two big goldfish and brought them to the door.

"Suppose we put them in your globe," beamed the clever young salesman, "and see how they look."

"But I already have two goldfish. And that's enough."

"Very true, Mrs. Boggs. As you say, two goldfish is enough for anybody. And that is why we suggest that you let us make you a proposition wherein we will gladly accept your old goldfish in trade."

Getting into the house, despite her feeble objections, Poppy put the new fish in the globe, and while he was talking to her, telling her how up-to-date they were and the very last word in goldfish styles, I fished out the old ones.

"They are pretty," Mrs. Boggs squinted into the globe.

"Beautiful," says Poppy, rolling the word around in his mouth.

"How much are they?" came the cautious inquiry.

"A dollar a pair. And we'll gladly allow you forty cents apiece on your old models."

"That's the second time you've used that word," says Mrs. Boggs suspiciously.

"A mere slip of the tongue," says Poppy, avoiding my eyes.

She then got her purse and paid us twenty cents, after which we politely bowed ourselves out of the front door.

"Well," Poppy stepped it off, when we were in the street, "what have you got to say about my scheme now?"

"Don't crow too soon," says I, as we stopped at the next house. "Wait and see what Mrs. Perrin does to you."

But he took in thirty cents here. Just as easy as pie. So I kind of shut up. Anyway, it was a good scheme. I could see that, all right. The wonder to me was that I hadn't thought of it myself.

By six o'clock we had taken in a total of thirty-one dollars. And remember, too, that there were just as many goldfish in the pool as when we started out, only, of course, a good many of them weren't freckled yet. That took time. If we could do as well for one hundred days, working Ashton and the other near-by towns, we'd clear up three thousand one hundred dollars. And without a cent of expense! That was the most wonderful part of the scheme. Considering what had happened to poor Red I wouldn't be mean enough to say that we were glad of the scientist's blunder. But, just the same, it was a lucky thing for us that the spy, in discarding the mud bowl, had tossed it into the big fountain—though why he had discarded it so soon after digging it up was somewhat of a puzzle to us.

The red-ray bleaching machine having arrived from Chicago on the late afternoon train we heard that evening when we were down town that it was Doc Leland's intention to put the machine

into immediate use. I tried to get Red on the telephone to wish him good luck, but his mother, who was up again, wouldn't let him get out of bed. And when I was reminded to ask her if she wanted to trade in her old goldfish for a pair of the latest models, with all of the new attachments, she sharply hung up the receiver. I guess she didn't care to talk with me anyway.

Poppy and I had been too busy trading in goldfish to think up any new detective schemes. So, rather than just monkey around in the Hidden House, where we were planning to spend another night, we decided to lay off the detective stuff for a few hours and catch up with our sleep.

Early the following morning Doc Leland got us out of bed, telling us in his excited wheezing way that a strange freckle epidemic was sweeping the town. It was his belief that more of the fatal "Freckle Dust" had gotten into circulation, possibly in the city water supply, and to find out what the "Freckle Dust" was, so that he could fight it with the proper drugs, he had come here to get the mud that we had scraped from Red's face, intending to take the stuff to his office and analyze it.

It was then that Poppy and I noticed that over-

night our hands had broken out with small brown blotches. Hundreds of Tutter people were similarly affected, Doc told us, as he wrapped the mud in an old newspaper. And the sufferers were mostly women.

He sent me after some wrapping twine to put around his mud package, but I temporarily forgot all about twine and everything else when Poppy came tearing down the hall with the dumbfounding news that sometime during the night the dwarf had packed up his duds and skinned out.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SECRET STAIRCASE

It was breakfast time now. But as Mrs. Warmley hadn't showed up yet we hustled around in the usual capable Boy Scout style and got our own breakfast. Anyway, we were kind of glad that the feeble old lady didn't come downstairs right on the dot, for we hadn't figured out yet how we were going to break the news to her about the dwarf's empty bed without scaring the wits out of her. We had kept her in the dark thus far in the mystery's developments, to her own benefit, but it would seem now that we were fast coming to the end of our rope, as the saying is.

And as I flopped the pancakes around in the griddle I found myself wondering if we hadn't made a grave mistake by not handcuffing the fake sleeper while we had a chance. I had suggested that to the leader. But, as you know, he had talked me down. My face burned as I thought of the razzing that we would get at Bill Hadley's hands when it became known to him that we had

let one of the store robbers slip through our fingers. In earlier detective work, as recorded in the preceding books of this series, we had earned the marshal's professional respect. But our hitherto fine record was now a nest of rotten eggs. At the very least Bill never would have the same fine confidence in us. The outlook sickened me. And for a moment or two I didn't care whether I had any breakfast or not.

Poppy, though, was mowing down the stack of pancakes as merrily as you please.

"Jerry," he smacked, with syrup on his upper lip, "as a pancake artist you sure are one grand little triumph."

"Yes," says I, giving him a dig in return, "and as a detective you sure are one grand big sleepyhead."

"How about yourself?" he grinned goodnaturedly.

"If you had listened to me," I flopped another pancake onto the stack, "the dwarf would be in the cooler now."

"But what good would that do?" says he, stowing away the fodder as unconcerned as you please.

I pretended that I was going to throw the griddle at him.

"Of course," says I, kind of sarcastic-like, "you're tickled to death that the dwarf escaped."

"I'm not worrying about it," says he coolly. "For I have a hunch that we'll be able to find him when we need him. As a matter of fact, Jerry, his flight is considerable of a compliment to us."

"What do you mean?" I emptied the batter bowl.

"*He* knew that we were suspicious of him. And he was afraid that if he didn't skin out while he had the chance we'd spring some kind of a clever detective trap on him."

"Just the same," says I, "it's no credit to us that he got away while we were asleep. Bill Hadley won't like it for two cents. You know *him*. He'll bawl the life out of us."

"If it will make you feel better, Jerry, I can tell you where the dwarf is."

I stared at him.

"Where?" says I excitedly.

"In Mr. Lung's laundry."

There was a dead silence.

"Poppy," says I, with weak knees, "what kind of a weird scheme are these Chinamen up to, anyway?"

"I still believe it's the freckle cure."

"But what makes you so sure," says I, "that the dwarf is hiding in the laundry? You haven't any proof."

"It's the only place he could go, Jerry."

"He may have lit out for Chicago."

"I'd think so myself if he and the other spy had finished their work here. But we know that they haven't. The chances are ten to one that they're still in town. And, as I say, the laundry is the only place open to them."

"Poppy, I believe you're right. But the thought of Mr. Lung turning his laundry into a den of criminals sickens me. I wasn't crazy over him, for he's a Chinaman. But just the same I had a lot of respect for him. I trusted him, too."

It was plain to us now why the laundryman had turned against us. He was afraid that if he let us hang around as usual we'd see things in the back part of the laundry that he didn't want us to see. So he had chased us away in pretended hatred.

Well, I had learned my lesson. He was the last Chinaman *I* ever would have anything to do with. I was glad I had found him out.

Poppy then told me an amazing thing about the empty room. Unbolting the door he had found the window screens hooked on the inside,

which proved that the dwarf hadn't gone down a rope. How then had the midget gotten out of the room? Had some one opened the door for him? It would seem so.

However, we were soon to learn surprising things about that particular room.

We found Mrs. Warmley sitting up in bed crying. She had lost all hope, she told us, of ever seeing her son alive. We tried to cheer her up. But there was little that we could say. As a matter of fact it had long been concluded in Tutter that the runaway son was dead.

"How would you like to have us bake you a nice big pancake?" says Poppy as brightly as he could. "We fried our own pancakes in lard. But if you'll let us fix up one for you we'll fry it in butter."

"What a dear good boy you are!" the old lady's eyes filled with fresh tears. "I don't think, though, that I could eat a pancake, however carefully and lovingly you prepared it for me. Somehow I haven't any appetite this morning. . . . Would you mind lowering the shades, Jerry? The bright light hurts my eyes."

While I was busy at the windows Poppy gave her a kiss. But that was all right.

"I think," says she, upon my return to the bed-

side, "that you boys had better write to Dr. Bergen in Chicago and ask him to make other early arrangements for the dwarf's care. For I feel that the responsibility is too much for me."

Here was a way for us to get rid of the dwarf, as you might say, without telling her the truth. And of the same thought the leader and I exchanged quick glances, after which he inquired:

"Does the doctor owe you any money, Mrs. Warmley?"

"Only twenty dollars. You might mention it to him in your letter."

"How often does he write to you?" then came the further inquiry.

"I had a letter from him day before yesterday."

"Did you ever hear of him, Mrs. Warmley, before he wired you in reply to your advertisement?"

"No."

"How did you happen to put the patient in your son's room? Was that the doctor's suggestion?"

"Yes. It was the only room he would consider. I didn't want to let him use it. I—I wanted to keep it just as Sidney left it. But he

insisted. So, needing the money, I moved my son's things into another room."

"And you say the doctor told you to put a bolt on the outside of the door?"

"Yes. That was to prevent the dwarf from walking in his sleep."

"But the door has a regular lock."

"I know it has. But the doctor strangely insisted on a bolt. He said it was safer."

"Has the dwarf shown any signs of wakefulness since he has been here?"

"No."

"And you never heard him walking around his room in the middle of the night?"

"He frightened me one night. I thought I heard him in the clothes closet."

Poppy peculiarly searched her face.

"But why should that frighten you? He was locked in his room."

"I was afraid he might find the secret door in the closet floor."

"What?" cried Poppy, staring.

Memories brought added sorrow to the woman's face.

"To explain what I mean," she composed herself, "I must go back to the time this house was

built. Sidney was just a small boy then. He had been reading a book about an old castle the stone walls of which were honeycombed with weird secret passages. And nothing would satisfy him but to have a 'secret staircase,' as he called it, built into the wall between the music room and the library, under the closet of his own room. It was an added expense. But his father could deny him nothing. The work was done by an old man who long since has passed away. Following Mr. Warmley's death only two people knew of the existence of the secret staircase, Sidney and myself. I haven't been near it for years. And I never expected to speak of it to anyone outside of the family, for that was Sidney's wish. But somehow, Poppy, it pleases me to tell you about it. I know that I can trust to Jerry's discretion, too. You both are trustworthy boys. Sometime when you're sure of not disturbing the patient, examine the floor of the closet, which in reality is a trapdoor. And below it is the hidden staircase leading to the basement, where you'll find a secret door in the wall. Of course, the patient knows nothing about the staircase. But I was afraid that he might accidentally open the trapdoor while walking in his sleep and suffer a bad

fall. However, on the night in question I found him safe in bed."

Poppy and I were staring at each other now. So this explained how the dwarf had escaped from the locked room! He had gone down the secret stairs and out through the basement door. Moreover, it was the creaking of the trapdoor's probable rusted hinges that I had heard just before the "ghost" had sent me scooting down the hall.

As can be imagined the leader and I lost no time taking a trip up and down the secret stairs. It was a clever job. And as I thought of the money that it had cost I found myself wondering in puzzled thoughts how any boy with such a home as this and with such kind parents could possibly go wrong.

If Poppy and I had needed added proof of the two Chinamen's use of the secret staircase we would have found it in the many footprints on the dusty steps. We further traced these footprints across the basement floor to the outside door, thus getting the complete story of the spy's movements in and out of the house.

That morning Poppy quietly went off by himself, as is frequently his habit. He can think better, he tells me, when he's alone. And when

he came back I was struck by the troubled look in his eyes.

"Jerry," says he, sinking into a seat, "I hardly know what to do."

"You look sick," says I anxiously.

"I feel sick," he dropped his face into his hands.

"What's the matter, Poppy?" says I, sitting down beside him. "Tell me about it."

"Jerry," he straightened, "if we finish this detective job it may be the end of Mrs. Warmley. For even if the shock doesn't kill her outright, feeble old lady that she is, she'll die soon afterwards of a broken heart."

"Poppy!" I cried, staring at him. "You scare me."

"I feel scared myself, Jerry. As I say, I hardly know what to do. Still," his face darkened, "I know what I'd like to do. I'd like to take that dirty cur by the throat and choke the life out of him. Talk about anybody having a heart of ice! He has no heart at all. Or conscience, either. His poor old mother! For years and years she's been waiting here, eating her heart out with loneliness, hoping and praying for his return. If only he would come home she was ready and eager to forgive everything. And here he is at last, after

all these long years, up to his neck in further dirt, with two *Chinamen* working for him—in his own town, mind you, and, even worse, in his own mother's home. Why, he hasn't as much decency as the vilest snake that ever lived. He deserves to be boiled in lard. But what can we do, Jerry? If he's arrested it will kill his mother, as I say. Yet it doesn't seem right that he should go free."

During the time that Mrs. Warmley had been talking to us about the hidden staircase I had wondered how the two Chinese spies had learned the secret. It never had occurred to me, though, for a single instant, that Sidney Warmley was the "master mind" behind the scheme to steal the perfected freckle cure. So you can imagine how dumbfounded I was at Poppy's outburst.

But I knew that the leader was right. After more than thirty years the runaway son had come home. But what a home-coming! Sneaking in and out of his aged mother's home in the dark like the undoubted criminal that he was. Certainly, the law held no punishment that he didn't deserve. But, as Poppy had said, we hardly dared to raise a finger against him.

Could it be, we further discussed the situation, striking a new angle, that the returned son had

done the kissing act instead of the goofy Professor, as we had suspected? If so, then the runaway, after all, must have some shame. For nothing short of remorse could have prompted the stolen kiss. And if we had the right kind of a talk with him we might be able to work on his shame and induce him to abandon the evil scheme, or, at least, to dig out alone in time to escape arrest.

Maybe we were wrong. Maybe as detectives we should have let the law take its course regardless of anything and everything. But, as I say, Mrs. Warmley was a dear old lady. She had lived a sad life. And we wanted to spare her further sorrow if we could.

It was our plan now to go directly to the laundry. If we couldn't get in the front door we'd use the back door. And if Mr. Lung got too fresh we'd take him down and sit on him. He wasn't so big. As for Sidney Warmley, if he was the hardened criminal that we suspected, with a long evil life behind him, he might make it pretty blamed exciting for us. But we figured that we'd come out all right when he heard our story, thus learning that we had come to him in the interests of his aged mother.

Much depended on the kiss. If it was the son's kiss we probably would succeed in our scheme. If it was the Professor's kiss we might find ourselves in a bad fix. So for safety's sake I wrote dad a postal card telling him that if I came up missing he and Mr. Ott were to search the Chinese laundry, taking particular pains to look behind all locked doors, trapdoors included. For Poppy and I both remembered that there was a trapdoor in the living-room ceiling.

CHAPTER XX

WHAT WE SAW IN THE LAUNDRY

BILL HADLEY stopped us on our way to the laundry.

"I thought you fellers told me," says he gruffly, motioning us into the police station, "that Purfessor Pip dug that hole near the conservatory."

"That's our theory," says Poppy truthfully.

"Well," grunted the marshal, "your theory's wrong. The hole was dug by a boy. And if it turns out that you fellers have bin lyin' to me, to cover up some underhanded work of your'n, it's goin' to go hard with you, I kin tell you that much. Nor is the friendship that I have for your dads goin' to make a particle of difference, either. . . . Take off your shoes," came the unexpected sharp command.

He had a piece of paper cut in the form of a shoe sole, to which he tried to match our shoes in turn, finding, though, that our footwear overlapped the paper sole by at least half an inch.

"Humph!" he grunted, jabbing the paper into

his coat pocket. Then he shoved our shoes at us. "That's all," says he shortly.

"What makes you think," says Poppy curiously, "that the hole wasn't dug by Professor Pip?"

"In diggin' the hole the worker left his footprint in the loose dirt. I made a copy of it yesterday afternoon. I see, though," came the grudged admission, "that I was wrong in suspectin' you boys."

"You ought to do like the king's son in the Cinderella story," grinned Poppy.

But Bill had outgrown his interest in Cinderella.

"I don't s'pose," says he, like the crafty detective that he was, "that you noticed any other boys hangin' 'round the conservatory night before last."

"Sure thing," says Poppy. "Young Ringbow was there with his gang."

In trying to find a shoe to match his paper sole it never had occurred to Bill that *two* diggers had been at work in the hole, the second one digging up what the first one had buried. Nor had it occurred to Poppy or I either, for that matter, that the small-footed dwarf, and not the daggery-eyed spy, had dug up the mud bowl, which, however, was an unimportant point.

"I would 'a' swore," says Bill, when we asked him what progress he had made toward the runaway scientist's arrest, "that the ol' geezer was hidin' in the Weir marsh. I guess, though, he lit out fur more distant parts. The ol' fool! He's liable to be lynched if we ever bring him back here. Fur on top of what he did to Red Meyers the hul town is speckled up from his 'Freckle Dust.' My wife's even got it on her feet. Doc Leland is goin' to test the city water this mornin' if he kin git away from his patients. He was up the biggest part of the night, I hear. Not that the freckles hurt any. But everybody who has 'em is scared to death they'll spread. Take my wife: She doesn't care how many freckles she has on her feet, but she'd have seven cat fits if they got up on her nose."

This talk about the freckle epidemic reminded us to look at our own spotted hands.

"I swan!" says Bill, following our eyes. "So you boys have got it, too, huh? I wouldn't 'a' believed it possible fur freckles to spread this way if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. 'Freckle Dust!' What in tarnation kind of stuff do you s'pose it is, anyway?"

"Probably some secret drug that the Profes-

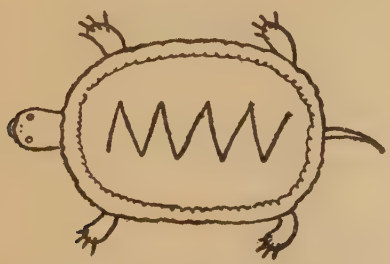
sor discovered in his experiments," says Poppy.

"It looks like ground cinnamon," I put in.

"Mebbe it's ground up freckles," Bill grinned.

Passing into the street we met several anxious-eyed women hurrying in the direction of Doc Leland's office. Recognizing them as fish customers of ours we bowed politely. But all they could see was Doc's crooked sign farther down the street. They didn't seem to see us at all. I guess, though, if we had known the truth about the freckle epidemic we'd have hid from them instead of trying to attract their attention.

Too busy to wait around in Doc's crowded office with the other freckle sufferers we went on to the laundry, where we met a kid carrying a turtle with funny marks on its back. I'll draw it for you:



"I found it in the alley back of the laundry," Tommy Hegan told us.

Poppy took one look.

"Jerry!" he cried. "It's the distress sign. What do you know about that!"

You will remember about the secret signs of our "Freckled Goldfish" lodge. As a matter of fact we never had expected any of the members to use the signs. We just put them into the initiation to make it seem more impressive-like. And least of all had we expected to see the distress sign carved on the back of Mr. Lung's turtle. Under ordinary circumstances such a thing would have excited us. But having it come on top of all the other things that seemed to be centered around the laundry completely flabbergasted us, as the saying is.

Passing the laundry without turning in we went around in back. The darkened windows had a sort of sinister look. Earlier we had suspected that there was some strange mystery here. Now we knew that the laundry housed a hidden peril as well.

For without a doubt the fresh carving on the turtle's back was a silent cry for help. Some one imprisoned here, familiar with the secrets of our lodge, had set the carved turtle loose, hoping that it would fall into our hands. But who could it be? The laundryman knew our secret signs. But certainly *he* wasn't a prisoner.

"Poppy," says I excitedly, "do you suppose the Chinamen have captured Professor Pip."

"Crickets!" the other jumped at the theory. "I never thought of that. Maybe they got him night before last. Sure thing. He never ran away at all. And instead of *him* ransacking his room it was one of the spies."

You can see how we were fixed. If we called on Bill Hadley to help us he would arrest the whole gang, Sidney Warmley included. And if we went openly into the laundry, as we had intended doing, we probably would get a dose of the same peril that hung over the old scientist. No, as the leader said, the safer plan would be to wait until night and then work in secrecy.

It was blamed risky business. I realized that, all right. But in the moments when my courage kind of bagged at the knees, as it were, I thought of the lonely old lady in the Hidden House. That made me brave. I knew then how the knights of olden times felt when they went forth in armor to fight gallantly for the hand of their lady love. Of course, Mrs. Warmley wasn't our lady love—I don't mean that. We weren't trying to marry her. But we did want to help her.

At dinner time we fixed up something special for her, to kind of coax out her appetite. Just

before we sat down to the table Dad called up, telling me that he and Mother were going over to Ashton to spend the afternoon and evening. Dinner out of the way, we then took a look at the goldfish, discovering that the new ones in the pool hadn't started to freckle yet. Evidently the "Freckle Dust" worked slower on some kinds of goldfish than on others. However, we were just as well satisfied to wait another day. And before the afternoon was over we were glad that we had waited. Gosh! When we learned indirectly that Doc Leland was testing the water in Mrs. Boggs' goldfish globe it came to us like a flash that *we* were the cause of the freckle epidemic. No wonder the sufferers were mostly women. Like us they had gotten the freckles on their hands from the goldfish. As for Bill's wife, she probably had poured some of the goldfish water into the foot tub by mistake. Boy, did we ever feel sick? More than that we felt *simple*. How mortified Mother would be when she learned the truth. And the neighbors would be mad enough to snatch us bald-headed.

Late in the afternoon Mrs. Ringbow paid us another visit, wanting this trip to *rent* some of Mrs. Warmley's old furniture. Can you imagine

such nerve! It seems that the author who was scheduled to arrive in town in a few days was a connoisseur, or whatever you call it, of rare old furniture. And it was Mrs. Flossie's clever little plan to pull a "scoop" on the other Tutter society women by getting the famous visitor into her home and keeping him there. The furniture, she figured, would be a big help. Oh, she was slick, all right. And it was just a mere coincidence, of course, that she was trying to sell the library association a lot that some wealthy relative had left her, which largely explains why she had come to Tutter in the first place. If she could get the innocent author to recommend this particular lot as the ideal site for the new library, things might turn out quite handsomely for Mrs. Flossie.

"I'm quite sure," says Poppy politely, "that our furniture isn't for rent at any price. However, I'll ask Mrs. Warmley as soon as she wakes up and let you know."

Evidently the old lady had taken a sleeping powder, for her eyes were still closed when we looked in on her that evening. And wanting to save her a possible trip to the dwarf's room we put twenty dollars of our "fish" money into an envelope, explaining in an accompanying note that

the patient was gone. Then, having slipped the envelope into her wrinkled hand as it rested on the bedspread, we locked the house and lit out for the laundry, where we hung around in the alley until ten-thirty. The Chinaman's light had now been out for more than thirty minutes, so we skinned up a fire escape to the roof of the Onstad grocery store, crawling in the darkness across the roof of the Commercial Bank, sliding from there to the lower roof of Mrs. Biggle's beauty parlor, which, you will remember, was next door to the laundry building.

Raising a scuttle we dropped noiselessly into a low stuffy attic. And for a moment or two I held my nose. For the stagnant air was thickened with a queer druggy smell. I didn't like it at all. Still, it was what you'd naturally expect in a Chinaman's joint.

Poppy's flashlight picked up a trapdoor a few feet away. Before raising it, though, the leader liberally oiled the hinges, having come prepared.

Everything was dark below us. It was like looking into a cistern. The only sound was the metallic chatter of a clock. To play safe, though, we waited until the clock struck eleven. Then,

as the silence continued, we took a chance and explored the familiar lower living room with our flashlight, finding it deserted of every form of life, even the macaw.

The prepared leader further had a rope. And fastening one end to a beam he carefully lowered the other end through the framed opening.

"Remember, Jerry," he whispered, getting ready to descend, "if I yell, pull quick. Or if I can't make my escape, beat it and sound the alarm. If everything's safe I'll wink the light three times."

It seemed to me that I waited there for hours. But though I imagined a million crowding dangers nothing happened. And after a noiseless trip throughout the lower rooms the daring leader flashed the "safe" signal.

"Are they all asleep?" I breathed, joining him.

"Jerry," he spoke in a queer voice, "there's no one here."

"Not *anybody?*"

"Not even Professor Pip."

"But where are they?"

"Gee-miny crickets," says he impatiently. "How should *I* know? I'm no mind reader. They just *aren't* here, that's all."

"Well, you needn't yell," says I stiffly. "For they may be closer than you think. . . . Did you look under the beds?"

"Yes, and I looked in the closets and down the cellar stairs and *everywhere*."

In searching the rooms for possible clews bearing on the mystery we found a satchel full of small clothes, which proved that the dwarf had been here, all right. But where was he now? Moreover, where was the laundryman, himself, and the rest of the evil gang?

We found the body of the macaw in a box of rubbish back of the water heater. The bird had been strangled. I shivered at sight of it. For I knew *why* it had been strangled. It knew the laundryman's secret. And he was taking no chances.

That queer gurgling sound! I thought of it. It meant something, but what? I remembered, too, that the bird had peculiarly called the turtle by name. The turtle with the carved back!

Suddenly we were startled by a sound at the back door. Out went our light. And we scooted breathlessly for the rope. Told to go up first I found to my horror, when I was halfway to the ceiling, that the knot was slipping. I could feel it

give. Clutching frantically for the edge of the framed opening I ended up in a heap on the floor, the rope on top of me. And there we were!

A kid when trapped can always hide under the bed as a last resort. And thus flattened out we heard the back-door key fall to the floor, having been pushed out of the lock. That was queer, I thought. Then the unlocked door opened, inch by inch.

"Jerry!" the leader breathed in a bewildered voice. "It's the geezer with the skeleton key."

It was too deep for me.

"I'm lost, Poppy," says I, dizzily.

"We'll both be lost," says he grimly, "if old dagger-eyes looks under the beds, after seeing that open trapdoor."

The newcomer was now tiptoeing from room to room with a flashlight. But when we saw his feet we knew it wasn't the swamp man. Instead, it was the dwarf.

At least we *thought* it was the dwarf. Imagine our added bewilderment, then, to discover, in a guarded peek, that it was an American boy, a strange boy, too, not more than twelve years old.

And Bill Hadley had told us that the hole had been dug by a boy! Would wonders never cease!

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE OLD STORM SEWER

It was plain to us from the kid's wary actions as he tiptoed about the laundry that he didn't belong here. Like us he had come here in some kind of secret work. So what better way of solving the mystery, we thought, with no fear of him, than to lay low and watch him. Or even if he discovered that he had a hidden audience it wasn't improbable that we could put him through a sort of third degree, here or some place else, thus making him tell the truth about himself.

But how completely he and his skeleton key had upset our pet theories! We hardly knew where we were at.

To one point, even though he didn't belong here, he plainly was in close touch with the laundry gang's secret work. Could it be, I thought excitedly, that he was a boy detective. That would explain his ownership of the key. I hoped that he was a detective. Somehow I didn't like to think of him being a store robber. For he was just a boy like ourselves.

Evidently he had suspected that the gang was away from home for he showed no surprise at sight of the empty beds. Nor did the open trapdoor arouse his suspicions. To that point he seemed to have no fear at all of hidden eyes, which was a lucky thing for us, all right.

Having satisfied himself that none of the gangsters had remained behind he went to the cellar door, where, after a brief pause, he started guardedly down the stairs. When we got there, though, he was gone! The cellar was a black well.

Following him down the stairs we found, back of a huge pile of dirt, a gaping hole in the stone wall. So this is where the laundry gang had disappeared to! Into the earth like rats! And the strange kid had followed them.

It took nerve to go into that dark hole, the walls of which were boarded up to keep the dirt from caving in. But we kept on, grimly determined, finally getting down on our hands and knees as the passageway tapered to a mere dog run. After a short distance of this we found ourselves in a brick-walled circular tunnel, stretching off at right angles in both directions.

"Poppy!" I whispered excitedly. "It's the old storm sewer."

"Storm sewer?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

"It was built when Dad was a boy," says I, "to carry off the flood waters from College Hill. But the very first cloudburst stopped up the inflow with tons of gravel. So they had to abandon it."

There was no sign of the strange kid. Nor could we determine his course by searching the sandy floor of the sewer. For the footprints that he had made were lost in dozens of others.

Poppy suddenly doused his light.

"Quick, Jerry," he breathed, crawling into the hole.

I don't mind telling you that I was scared all the way through.

"What did you see?" I shivered, when we were back in the cellar.

"A flashlight. Off to the right in the direction of the bank. I don't know, though, whether it was the kid or not. But I thought we better get out of there to play safe."

"Poppy," I further shivered, "this job is going to be the death of me."

His eyes were like twin stars.

"Good old pal!" he slapped me on the back. "Don't lose any of your grit. For I have a hunch

that you're going to need every bit of it before the night is over."

Hiding in the dark we heard the kid come back through the tunnel. But instead of going upstairs, as we expected, he sat down on a soap box.

Evidently something preyed on his mind. His actions showed it. We heard him talking bitterly to himself, like a fellow does sometimes with a troubled conscience. But the tones were too low for us to catch the words. Then he got up and went back into the tunnel, entirely unconscious of the fact, of course, that two Juvenile Jupiter Detectives were dogging his heels.

"He's going the other way this time," Poppy whispered to me.

We could barely stand up in the big sewer. And in places where the sand had accumulated to a depth of a foot or more we had to bend to save our heads. Moreover, we were walking at a disadvantage, having wrapped our flashlight in a handkerchief to keep the kid from spotting us.

"The sewer must cut through Mrs. Warmley's yard," says Poppy, keeping his directions.

"Sure thing," says I, remembering what Dad had told me. "We're probably under her yard now."

"Do you suppose, Jerry," came in a queer voice, "that there's a connection between the sewer and the Hidden House?"

I thought of the secret stairs.

"Why not?" says I, ready to believe any theory, no matter how wild it was.

"Then the kid must know where he's going."

"Sure thing."

"It's bewildering, Jerry."

"Oh, no," says I, feeling kind of crazy. "It's as plain as day. The laundry gang loves us so much they couldn't rest easy until they found a way of getting into the house to coo over us in our sleep."

"Jerry, what *are* they doing in the Hidden House?"

"Let's hope," says I, shivering, "that they aren't cutting Mrs. Warmley's throat."

"I thought it was the freckle cure. But it must be something deeper than that."

"Yes," says I, "considerably deeper."

Keeping our eyes on the kid's moving light we saw him turn to the right out of sight. And upon coming to the spot where he had disappeared we found another break in the sewer wall similar to the one at the laundry, only larger and better

done. We could tell, too, that it was very old work.

Turning into the smaller passageway we ended up, after a few feet, to no great surprise, at the foot of the hidden staircase. The others couldn't be far away. And standing under the trapdoor at the head of the stairs we would have given a great deal to have seen into the runaway's room. Still, it was most improbable that he was here with his evil gang, for the strange kid had climbed the stairs ahead of us.

Raising the trapdoor, inch by inch, we found that we had the room to ourselves. Nor was there any sign of the kid or anyone else in the silent hall. We knew, though, that he was in the house. And a sort of intuition, or whatever you call it, told us to go directly to Mrs. Warmley's room, where we discovered the stranger standing beside the bed reading our note about the dwarf. We almost jumped at him when he stuffed the twenty dollars into his own pocket. It was well, though, that we waited. For almost immediately he put the money back, after which he searched his own pockets, adding two or three bills to the envelope's contents.

Then he gently kissed the sleeper on the

wrinkled cheek and turned to leave, sending us scooting to cover. Following him down the hall we saw him turn into a store room, seemingly attracted here by a huge oil painting that stood on the floor. Having uncovered the painting he studied it for several minutes in deep silence. Then, dropping into a seat, he buried his face in his hands. And such bitter despairing sobs I never heard in all my life.

I had made a strange discovery. Outside of his clothing the kid was a perfect counterpart of the boy in the old painting.

"It's Sidney Warmley, himself," I told Poppy, forgetting for the moment that the runaway was now a man grown.

"No," says the sensible leader, "it isn't Sidney Warmley. But it's some one who looks enough like him to be his own son."

Just then a terrific clatter came out of the basement.

"Great balls of fire!" roared Bill Hadley. "Where are we now?"

Then, among the other clamoring voices, I heard Dad calling my name.

Well, I didn't know what had happened. But I figured that I ought to let my parent know that

I was safe. So I ran down the stairs to the kitchen. Bill was the first one to come out of the basement. And when he saw me he let out a roar.

"Here he is, Todd. Seems to be all in one hunk, too. So I guess your worries are over."

Mr. Ott pushed forward.

"Where's Poppy?" says he.

"Upstairs," says I.

"Are you all right, Jerry?" Dad anxiously searched my face.

"Sure thing," I grinned. "What made you think I wasn't?"

"Your postal card was in the mail box when we got home to-night. Unable to locate you I aroused Bill and his deputies. The Chinamen are all in jail, Jerry. We caught them boring into the vault of the Commercial Bank. We found Professor Pip, too. Following the arrests we further explored the old sewer, in search of you and Poppy. And here we are."

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERY ENDS

WELL, there isn't a great deal more for me to tell except to piece in here and there.

To start with, the Chinaman whom we took for Mr. Sam Lung wasn't the laundryman at all, but his evil twin brother, Sung Lung, who had learned about the secret passageways in the Hidden House through reading the diary of his accomplice, Sidney Warmley. The latter on his deathbed in the east had confessed to his Chinese associate that he had a wife and child living in Chicago, but when Sung Lung came west to look up the dead man's family he learned that the wife, too, was dead, the son having been adopted, in a way, by Fu Wang, a man who posed as a goldfish importer but whose main business was selling stolen goods. The two Chinamen were old friends.

Sung Lung had read things in the diary that made him believe that diamonds and other loot were hidden in the abandoned storm sewer, which

Sidney Warmley had secretly tapped one winter while his parents were in Florida. So the scheming Chinaman came to Tutter to look things over, thus learning, from local gossip, that the aged mother of his dead friend was a "miser." What more likely, thought the greedy Chinaman, than that she had vast sums of money hidden in the lonely house. Her advertisement for convalescent boarders gave him a fine chance to get one of his gang into the house, it being the pretended sleeper's double job to search nights for the hidden wealth and admit the gang's other two members, Sung Lung, himself, and the daggery-eyed store robber. Mrs. Warmley's instructed use of a bolt on the outside of the door left the lock free to the dwarf, who always turned his skeleton key before leaving the room by way of the secret stairs, thus preventing the discovery of his empty bed.

It was found that the storm sewer did contain considerable loot, put there years ago by a boy who stole because he couldn't control his desire to steal. He was born that way. However, the Chinamen were disappointed in their secret watch over Mrs. Warmley. Instead of leading them to the anticipated chest of hoarded gold they learned

that she was virtually destitute. Then, tracing the course of the storm sewer, and learning that it passed under the Commercial Bank, Sung Lung conceived the bolder scheme of boring into the money vault from below. It would be better, though, if he could tap the sewer closer to the bank. So, when he learned that his twin brother, of whom he had heard nothing in years, was the worthy proprietor of the corner laundry, he made short work of imprisoning the laundryman and generally taking charge, depending for the success of the impersonation on his marked resemblance to the other twin.

So the tunnel was quickly built from the laundry cellar to the storm sewer, and the work went on under the bank vault. Earlier the Chinamen had suspected that Professor Pip and Red were digging for buried treasure, for a great many Tutter people never will get over talking about the gold cucumbers that Poppy and I found in the river bottoms, and what more likely than that added treasure of the old pirate's had been hidden in the swamp bearing his name. So you can see what "dagger-eyes" was doing in the swamp the day I got the scare. I suppose he thought it was funny, in spotting me, to fool me by putting his hat

and coat on a stump. However, we never found out what his object was in peeping at Poppy through the window, though, to that point, it is very improbable, to my notion, that the Chinaman actually entered the house, as my chum suspected.

Later the Chinese gang got the notion that the scientist was in reality a detective. So, as the time drew near for them to tap the bank vault, rather than run the chance of being surprised at the last moment they decided to imprison the "detective," which they did, though not before the frightened old man had crazily buried his precious yellow mud, having sensed their presence near the conservatory before the attack. On the night we entered the laundry the gang was at work under the bank vault, having taken the Professor and the laundryman with them for safety. You will remember that we followed the sewer to the left, away from them, toward the Hidden House, from which the dwarf had earlier fled, fearful, as Poppy had suspected, that we would show him up. You know of the arrest. So there isn't much more to say about the three Chinamen, who to-day are in the penitentiary.

Sidney Warmley, I might say briefly, was, to

the shame and sorrow of his parents, a born kleptomaniac. As I say, he stole because he hadn't enough will power to keep from it. He wanted to do it. Such was his nature. Queer but true. Having tapped the storm sewer he hid his loot there, growing worse as he grew older. Finally, to escape arrest, he ran away, as we know. The least we say of his later life the better.

He did a wise thing, though, when, before his death, he turned his diary over to a lawyer, arranging to have the book delivered to his son on the latter's twelfth birthday. Little Sid, as I will call him, for he was named after his father, had learned a lot of dirt himself. He was encouraged in this by the rascally man he worked for. But the boy got a jolt when he read his father's diary. He saw what he was heading into. And he wanted to stop then and there. He wanted to hunt up his grandmother and be square and clean, as a boy should, but from the tone of the diary he got the notion that his grandmother didn't want him, which explains why he sobbed so bitterly that night in the store room. He felt that he had to go away. And he didn't want to go away. He wanted to stay near his loveable old relative.

But before I can explain his presence in Tutter

I'll have to go back to Mr. Sam Lung. You will remember his peculiar actions the day we closed our goldfish business. We would be back, he declared confidently. Knowing that there was such a thing as real freckled goldfish he had ordered fifty from a Chicago importer, making the usual mistake, though, of adding an extra cypher to his order. He intended to surprise us when the goldfish arrived, thinking, I guess, that we could use them in a continuation of our "lodge" scheme, thus making a lot more money. Having closed our business on Tuesday, it was that same night that Mr. Lung was choked into insensibility by his rascally twin brother, which explains the macaw's imitative "gurgling," and which further explains why the bird was killed. Later the impersonator kicked his brother's turtle out of the laundry, but not before the prisoner had carved the distress sign into the shell, which, I think you'll agree with me, was a pretty clever trick for a Chinaman.

As all of Fu Wang's "freckled" goldfish came from southern China the price naturally was high. And when he got an order for five hundred, at a cost of fifty cents apiece, he began to wonder if the Tutter countryman would properly pay the

bill. To make sure of getting his money he shipped the goldfish by truck, sending his "boy" along to care for them, with strict orders not to deliver them unless the bill of two hundred and fifty dollars was paid. The thought that he was headed for Tutter, where his grandmother lived, filled the Chicago boy's heart with great joy. Even if he couldn't tell her who he was he intended to see her and possibly talk with her. Due to arrive in Tutter Wednesday afternoon he walked into town when the truck broke down, learning, to his surprise, that the laundry operator was a member of the Chinese underworld, by name Sung Lung. Yet the goldfish had been ordered by *Sam* Lung! Familiar with the ways of criminals the boy suspected that a scheme was on foot to rob the near-by bank. So instead of delivering the goldfish at the laundry he later carried them into town in buckets, dumping them into his grandmother's fountain, figuring that he could easily recover them when needed. Getting into the Hidden House at dusk he hid under the piano when the "sight-seeing" party arrived, stealing the handbag and later returning it in shame. We know, too, that he was in his grandmother's room during the time that we were in the conservatory

watching the "operation." Later he saw Professor Pip bury something. He witnessed the old man's capture, too. Still later he curiously dug up the mud bowl, throwing it into the fountain when "dagger-eyes" took after him.

On the night of the arrests he decided to enter the laundry to prove his theory of the intended bank robbery. On his first trip into the tunnel, going to the *right,* he had seen the gang at work, just as he had suspected. On his return to the cellar he had deliberated whether to call the police or to let the criminals complete their work. It was a sort of battle between the old side of him and the growing new side. Later he was attracted to the Hidden House, knowing from what he had read in his father's diary that the sewer led there. And you know what followed.

I'll never forget that night. Getting the kid's story, with assurance of our friendship, we dressed him up in old-fashioned clothes just like the boy in the picture, telling him to wait in the store room. Then we went to get Mrs. Warmley, who, of course, wondered at our excitement.

"What *is* this wonderful surprise that you have for me?" she smiled curiously.

"You couldn't guess it in a hundred years,"

laughed Poppy. "Look at Jerry! He's so happy he doesn't know whether he's standing on his head or his feet."

"How about yourself?" I grinned, thinking, as I watched his beaming face, what a wonderfully manly fellow he was. I sure was proud of his friendship.

"Don't tell me," joked the old lady, "that I'm supposed to go downstairs and eat a pancake fried in butter."

"Isn't it true, Mrs. Warmley," old bright-eyes put an arm around her, "that you'd love to have a boy in the house all the time? I don't mean a visitor, like us, but a boy who really was your own."

"Oh, Poppy," she showed distress, thinking, of course, of her unworthy son. "Why do you mention that? You know I never can have another boy of my own."

"Of course," says Poppy soberly, "I wouldn't want you to have another boy who wasn't a good boy. But if you could kind of make your own boy come back, realizing that he'd always be honest and square, you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I wish you wouldn't speak of such things, Poppy," the old lady wiped her eyes. "My own

boy is dead. I know that I'll never see him again."

We then took her into the store room where she kept her son's things. The kid, of course, was under the cloth that covered the big painting. And when we took the cloth away I'll never forget the sort of longing, begging, hungry look in his eyes. Then he put out his arms. "Grandma!" he cried, stepping out of the picture, as it were. "Grandma, won't you keep me here?"

Afterwards, in learning how Mrs. Warmley fainted dead away, Mother told me that we might have killed the old lady. But it wasn't a serious fainting spell. It was a kind of happy spell. Poppy and I dug out as soon as we saw that she was all right again. And I guess the old lady and her new "boy" sat up all night, with their arms around each other, telling each other how happy they were going to be and how the past was dead and buried. Later Poppy helped sell the property, all except one corner section, and a bungalow is now going up on our street. I bet it will be swell with all that beautiful old furniture in it, the ten-million-dollar Peter the Great set, and so on and so forth. Still, Mrs. Warmley undoubtedly will miss her Queen Isa-

bella fresco! But though the homestead is going to be torn down the old lady says she never, never, never will give up her goldfish fountain. It's going to be moved on two big trucks, I hear. I'm kind of glad she's saving it. For every time I see it I'll be reminded of Poppy's "get-rich-quick" scheme. When I want to take him down a peg or two, as is sometimes necessary between the best of chums, I ask him, kind of gentle-like, if he remembers the time he sold Mr. Lung's fifty-cent goldfish for ten cents.

The Tutter gossips, of course, did a lot of buzzing over back-yard fences when it became known throughout town that Sidney Warmley, Jr., had come home to live with his grandmother. He'd turn out like his father, they waggled. But I want to tell you that little Sid is a *real* kid. All he needed was encouragement. He knows his father's story. He knows what the end was. And what boy with brains would want to come to an end like that? No, sir, you need never worry about Sid.

Then, later, the Tutter gossips almost died of heart failure when the report got abroad that the "old miser" had contributed a reserved corner of her valuable property to the library association.

And, in that connection, I want to tell you about the author's visit. Gee, he sure was a dandy fellow. It does a boy good to meet a man like that.

The day he arrived in Tutter Mrs. Flossie was at the depot with her shiny new sedan, determined, to her own interests, to land the important visitor by hook or by crook. Boy, was she ever lit up? She made the other members of the reception committee look like a total eclipse.

"I met Mr. Wainright in Indianapolis," she buzzed to the committee. "So naturally he'll want to make *my* home his headquarters."

This talk sounded big. But the joke was, as we learned later on, that the only time the nervy one had "met" the author was when she bought an autographed copy of one of his books in a store.

Seated grandly at the wheel of his mother's swell car young Rainbow jeered at Red and I when we drove up to the depot in an old Ford.

"You must be expecting some of your poor relations," says he, in his smart way.

But we kept shut. For Poppy had told us not to crow ahead of time, as there was a chance that his scheme might fail. But to act big Red and I got out of the four-wheeled wreck, critically

touching it up here and there with the polishing cloth. However, when one of the rusted fenders dropped off smarty almost hooted himself hoarse. It was an old car that we had borrowed from the junk dealer. The only way we could get it started was by towing it. So the one thing we didn't do at the depot was to throw off the switch. The exhaust pipe smoked like a volcano. And we made so much noise that the reception committee never heard the train pull in at all.

Poppy had boarded the train at Ashton. And when he and the expected author came down the car steps, arm in arm, Mrs. Flossie, remembering other things, looked sick. But her nerve didn't wholly desert her.

"Oh! . . ." she gushed. "I'm *so-o* pleased, Mr. Wainright, to meet you again, and to have the honor of entertaining you in my own home. May I present Mrs. Cinden, Mrs. Isham, Mrs. Nelson, Mrs. Smeeting and Miss Prentice. We're all enthused over our proposed library. And we *know*—don't we, ladies!—that you are going to be a *big* help to us . . . Chester dear, please take Mr. Wainright's grip."

But little old red-head got there first!

"This is Red Meyers, Mr. Wainright," Poppy

then introduced, when all of the excited committee members had had the chance to touch the famous hand. "And this is Jerry Todd."

The Tutter ladies gasped when the smiling visitor got into our old bus. As for Mrs. Flossie, we left her leaning weakly against her two-thousand-dollar sedan with a look on her face I can't describe. Old scores were evened. We had given the enemy a "licking," as you might say, that they'd remember, with burning cheeks, the rest of their lives.

Mr. Wainright laughed all the way to the Hidden House. It was the funniest experience of his life, he said. Then we introduced him to the old lady who was planning to donate the ten-thousand-dollar lot to the library association, and who owned the best collection of old furniture in the county. It was by telling the author about the proposed gift, and the old furniture, that Poppy had "landed" him. He fell in love with Mrs. Warmley. And I understand he's going to put her into his next book. I hope he remembers about me, too.

And the freckle epidemic? Well, that was a big joke. The only thing wrong with Red Meyers was "too much-e soap." The soap that we had

peddled all over town wasn't intended for home use. It was a cheap kind of laundry soap. And in the use of it, in the family dish pan, the Tutter women got little brown blotches on their hands, which was a sort of light skin disease resembling freckles. As for Red, as I say, it was the soap that the enemy rubbed into his face, just before the "operation," that fixed him. And it was through handling the soap and cleaning Red up that we got peppered. Red's face cleared up in a few days. And so far as I can see he's as homely as ever—but no worse. Later I heard that the soap company had been put out of business. So there's no telling what awful junk went into their product.

Collapsing after his rescue, Professor Pip was taken to the Ashton hospital, where it was learned that his mind was kind of fogged. So the world's freckled population may wait a long time for the perfection of his "cure." What his "Freckle Dust" was will never be known. And if you want to believe the "cow-tree" story you can. But we don't. Maybe that was all imagination.

This brings me to the end of my story. I have enjoyed telling it, just as it happened, and I hope that you have enjoyed reading it.

In the next "Poppy Ott" book you're going to hear a lot about a crazy totem pole. It came from Fort Wrangell, Alaska, and was carved, over a period of years, by the chiefs of a certain Tlingit clan. Standing thirty feet out of the ground, Poppy and I counted eleven carved faces, one above the other, mostly animals and strange birds. At the very top was an odd human figure, arms folded, wearing a stovepipe hat.

Only a queer man like Professor Quills would have cared for such an ornament in his front yard. But strangest of all the pole, at his orders, had been set *facing the house.*

The night Poppy and I were caught in the storm the blamed tittering totem pole tried to get chummy with us and crawl through the library windows, where we found the dead man. Talk about excitement! And then is when the fun and mystery began.

You surely won't want to miss this laughable, nonsensical bewildering tale—POPPY OTT AND THE TITTERING TOTEM.

—THE END—

This Isn't All!

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JERRY TODD AND THE PURRING EGG
JERRY TODD IN THE WHISPERING CAVE
JERRY TODD, PIRATE
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POPPY OTT AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH
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